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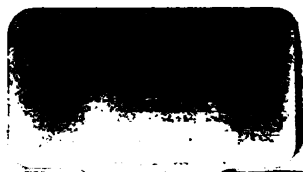
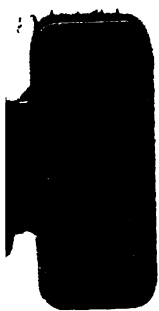


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LORD LEONARD THE LUCKLESS



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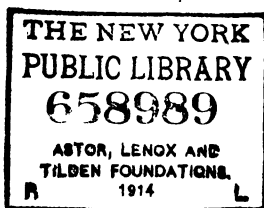
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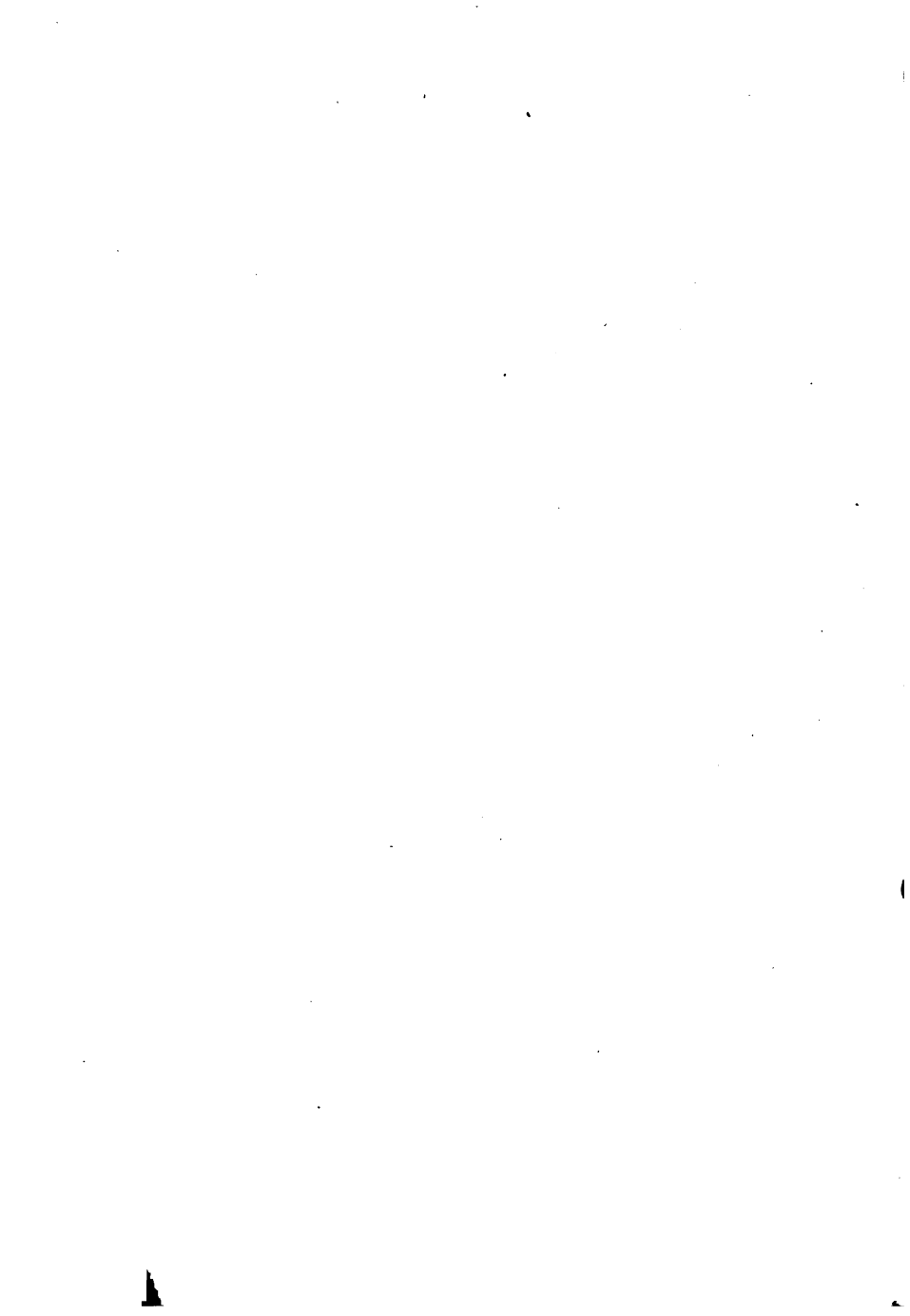
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PART I



LORD LEONARD THE LUCKLESS

CHAPTER I

Transformation

"ALL my life long," writes the late Lord Leonard, in that copious and strangely candid diary of his, which he must surely have intended, or half intended, for publication, yet which cannot possibly be published, "I have tried to speak the truth, to see it and to face it, feeling assured that nothing else is worth while. But now that the end is at hand, I am less confident. As for speaking the truth, that is, I believe, largely a matter of temperament; a man is what he has been made by Nature or his Creator, and, for my own part, I have no aptitude for lying. It remains, however, a question with me whether determination to view things exactly as they are is not, upon the whole, misguided energy. Certainly it does not promote happiness; for the truth, which is far more often than not painful, is sometimes downright hideous, and the vast majority, who perform their earthly pilgrimage in an atmosphere of illusion, seem to me to be a good deal better off without it than they could be with it.

*'Et pourtant,' says de Musset, 'elle-est eternelle,
Et ceux qui se sont passés d'elle
Ici-bas ont tout ignoré.'*

"Well, what then? Has not one of our own poets said, in words so apt as to have become almost proverbial, that

'where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise'? If I were delivering a homily to the young, and if there were the smallest chance of their listening to me, I really think I should advise them to close their eyes frequently, and to accept with gratitude such flattering, deluding reflections as their mirrors might find means to bestow upon them. What, after all, does one gain by knowing the lamentable things that I know?"

It is not certain that poor Lord Leonard always discerned the truth, bravely, patiently and pathetically as he strove to do so. Facts, it may be, were too much for him and obscured a vision unskilled to penetrate beyond hard, undeniable facts. But he was ever an honest man, as well as a most sorrowful one. Incapable of deceiving himself, he may yet very naturally and comprehensively have come to wonder, at the end of all, whether the faculty of self-deception be not amongst the most blessed of God's gifts to dwellers in an intricate, complicated world. His diary—so oddly bequeathed, together with other documents, to the present slightly puzzled compiler, whom he was pleased to constitute his "literary executor"—cannot, as has been said, be printed: what seems manageable is to present him and his story, under the convenient disguise of fiction and with the variations rendered imperative by discretion, to such readers as care to make acquaintance with the same. Thus presented, he will at least be intelligible; and this he never was to those who knew him in the flesh, unless perchance to one who saw him with the unclouded, unerring eyes of childhood and loved him as indeed he deserved to be loved. It must be owned that, save in the case of that one, his habitual speech and manner afforded little clue to his individuality. With these few words of preface the slightly puzzled compiler begs leave to make his bow and withdraw.

On a sunny afternoon of early summer two young Britannia cadets were seated, side by side, on the grass, looking on at a cricket match in which one of them was too lazy and the other not quite proficient enough to take part. Archie Morant, dowered with an athletic frame and per-

fect health, in addition to the physical beauty and other charms which were destined at a later period to involve him in endless scrapes, could do pretty nearly everything that he liked, but only upon occasion liked to do things which entailed trouble; his companion, dark, sallow, and rather too tall for his age, had different tastes and slender capabilities for gratifying them. Hubert Leonard would have liked to have been batting or fielding, had he been sufficiently good to be included in either team—always supposing, that is, that he could have preferred any privilege to that bestowed upon him by the society in which he found himself. But his affection and respect for the boy whose somewhat condescending friendship he enjoyed forbade him to quarrel with any situation of Morant's choosing. He listened deferentially, as he always did, to the latter's desultory talk, and tried, as he often did, to rise to the level of a mental standpoint so loftily exalted above his own. Yet he was intelligent and reflective in a measure beyond his years, whereas Archie Morant never had been, and never could develop into, anything but a fascinating goose. *Cultor veritatis* from the outset, Hubert Leonard was debarred by his temperament from detecting an unconscious fraud.

The colloquy which he found so interesting, and which his friend had well-nigh monopolised, was suddenly interrupted by a summons from the Captain, who had just made his appearance on the cricket field. This middle-aged, rosy-cheeked naval officer, who held an open telegram in his hand, received him with a countenance expressive of mixed emotions.

"My dear boy," he began, "I have bad news for you. This shocking accident to the Scotch mail seems to have been an even worse business than was supposed."

Young Leonard, not having looked at the daily papers, did not know that there had been a railway accident. He said "Yes, sir?" interrogatively.

"Yes; it turns out that there were several victims whose names were not at first reported, and I am very sorry to say that your uncle and both his sons were amongst them. A most terrible and tragic affair indeed! But it is kinder,

perhaps, to speak straight out than to attempt to break these things gently."

The boy's big brown eyes, which were almost black, became somewhat dilated; but there was no sign of gathering tears in them as he gravely asked: "Does this mean, then, that I am Lord Leonard, sir?"

The Captain was rather taken aback. "Heartless young beggar!" he thought to himself; "the idea that that should be the first aspect of the case to occur to him!" He replied aloud:

"Oh, yes; it means, of course, that you succeed to the title. It also means that you will have to go to your mother at once. She telegraphs that she is starting for Leonard's End, and she wishes you, as I understand, to join her there. You will be able to catch the express to Bristol if you look alive."

Now, it is true that the above-mentioned aspect of the case had been the first to suggest itself to the Captain of the *Britannia* and that this explained the modified compassion and sympathy so plainly legible upon his honest face; but then he had not been acquainted with the deceased peer, nor had he lost an uncle and a couple of cousins at one blow. "One hasn't, hang it all!" he reflected, "such a devilish keen eye to one's own interests at the age of sixteen, if one is in any way a decent chap!"

Poor Hubert was a very decent chap, and at no period of his career could he fairly be accused of an undue devotion to his own interests. What might fairly be said of him, then and always, was that he knew not how to simulate what he did not feel. He had twice seen his uncle, who had sharply snubbed him on both occasions; of his two cousins he had seen nothing at all. Their dramatic removal from this world affected him only in so far as it entailed a stupendous change, which he fully realised, in his position and prospects. To be transformed at a moment's notice from the impoverished and ignored son of a younger son into a great and wealthy nobleman is enough, surely, to shake the mental balance of any naval cadet; but it did not turn the sober head which surmounted our young friend's shoulders. Recognising dis-

tinctly what had happened to him, he was far from rejoicing; for he had no desire to be rich nor any ambition to be eminent. Two things he had looked forward to and longed for—a life on the wide, open sea, which he loved, and (with luck) a continuance of Archie Morant's intimate friendship. He was about, as he knew, to lose both, and he could have wept at the thought, had tears ever come readily to his solemn eyes. But he was constructed of that human material which suffers undemonstratively, suffers long and has the air of not suffering at all, save from inexcusable weariness. On his hurried way down to the ship, he paused to take leave of the beloved chum who was to be his chum no more, and this he accomplished in terms of the crudest brevity.

"I say, I've got to be off. My old uncle and both his sons have been killed in a railway smash, and I'm the next heir. This settles my hash. No going to sea for me now that I'm a lord, with a beastly big property; mother wouldn't hear of it, I'm sure."

Young Morant started out of his recumbent attitude and whistled. "By Jove!" he ejaculated, "you *are* a lucky devil! Any shooting on your place?"

"Oh, I suppose so; I've never been there."

"Well, don't you forget me next autumn, that's all."

"I won't forget you," the new Lord Leonard promised. "I must hook it now or I shall miss the train."

The two boys shook hands upon that and parted, Morant afterwards calling out, "Hi!—have you got my home address?"

The other nodded over his shoulder.

"Because if you didn't, I'd write and send it to you."

Leonard nodded again as he ran down the hill. He had wanted to beg his friend to write, but had been deterred from doing so by that queer, sensitive diffidence which was one of his misfortunes. Morant, he suspected, would never take so much trouble without some prospect of an equivalent. Well, the shooting would evidently be regarded in that light, and he perceived, as he was destined again and again to perceive thereafter, that the precise advantage of being rich and powerful consists in conse-

quent ability to offer equivalents. The disadvantage consists, no doubt, in consequent inability to distinguish gratitude from greed.

Nobody who knew Mrs. Leonard—that stern, handsome, upright, uncomplaining and highly capable widow—could have been so unjust as to call her a greedy person; whether she was of a grateful temperament or not nobody was in a position to determine, her circumstances not having been such as to draw forth manifestations of gratitude. Upon an exiguous income, which her opulent brother-in-law had not dreamed of augmenting, she had contrived heroically to make both ends meet and to give her only boy the education of a gentleman; too proud to grumble and far too proud to solicit pecuniary aid, she had dwelt since her widowhood in the obscurity of a tiny suburban villa, thus paying the penalty of bygone marital extravagances which she had been powerless to check. Lord Leonard, who had once upon a time defrayed a portion of his late brother's debts, rather particularly disliked her and took little or no notice of her. The remote contingency, which had now actually occurred, of Hubert's succeeding him had probably never for one moment entered into his calculations. Why, indeed, should it, considering that he had two fine, well-grown sons, and that he himself, a hale widower in the prime of life, was by no means disinclined to a second matrimonial venture? But improbability is no sure safeguard against the caprices of Fate or the decrees of an inscrutable Providence. It was to the latter influence that Mrs. Leonard piously preferred to ascribe a disaster which sent her post-haste, as in duty bound, to Leonard's End and caused her to despatch a telegram at once categorical and concise to the Captain of the *Britannia*. Like her son, to whom she may have transmitted something of her own character, she accepted changed fortune without outward elation; like him, she did not affect to mourn deaths which were in no sense a personal bereavement to her; but, unlike him, she was filled with an immense inward, suppressed joy. A gentlewoman by birth, she had been made to suffer horribly, albeit silently, by her enforced exclusion from the

only society possible to her and the dreary resulting solitude in which her recent life had been spent. Her feeling was that she had been dead and was alive again; if it had taken a catastrophe of the first magnitude to bring about her resurrection, the utmost that could be asked of her was that she should abstain from thanking God aloud for the method employed.

When Hubert reached Leonard's End, a beautiful old Tudor pile in the midlands, the greater part of which was as ancient as his inherited barony, he found his mother not less composed, grave and gently unapproachable than was her wont. She greeted him with a little dry kiss and read him a little dry homily, suitable to the occasion. It had pleased Heaven, she said, to call him abruptly to a great position, entailing serious responsibilities; it must be his endeavour henceforth to show himself worthy of the one and adequately to discharge the others. We are sent into this world, not to choose our manner of life, not to amuse ourselves or gratify our personal inclinations, but to perform a given task. He must never forget that he bore a title which had been worn by his predecessors for the best part of four centuries without stain or humiliation. The statement may have fallen a trifle short of strict historical accuracy; but it rang out with a certain sonorous appropriateness in the oak-panelled library which was the scene of its enunciation, and the boy was duly impressed. He never failed, indeed, to be impressed by his mother, although his sense of humour was somewhat more developed than hers. To the end of her days, and probably to the end of his, he held firmly to the belief that she was his intellectual and moral superior. So far as a constitutionally fearless being could be afraid of anybody, he was afraid of her, and during his boyhood, at all events, it did not so much as occur to him to question the finality of her decrees. It was, therefore, with only the faintest of faint hopes that he asked:

"Must I cut the Navy, mother?"

"It stands to reason that you must," was Mrs. Leonard's reply.

He had felt sure that she would say so; yet he essayed

one feeble, pathetic bid for liberty. "I believe, you know, it's about the only thing I'm fit for, and it's the only thing I want. Mightn't I have just a few years of it? After all, lots of other fellows who have come into property began life as sailors."

"Leonard," returned his mother gravely (from that day forth she never addressed him as "Hubert" again), "you do not understand what you are talking about. If there is a single instance of one in your present position having been brought up as a naval officer, I can only say that I am not aware of it. To have been educated in that way would not be advantageous to you in after life, and it cannot be thought of. I very much regret that it is now too late to send you to one of the great public schools; but of course, when the time comes, you will go up to Oxford and take your degree. Meanwhile, the best that can be done for you will have to be done. It is a matter for consideration and consultation."

She was not in the least likely to consult anybody, unless legally compelled to do so; nor, assuredly, would the slightest consideration be given to the boy's individual views. He yielded, with a smothered sigh and without further words. He was fond of his mother, as she, after her peculiar fashion, was undoubtedly fond of him; but they had never been upon terms of confidential friendship. His secrets remained his own; his longings and joys and sorrows and disappointments were for internal consumption only. It was in truth, for him, saying a good deal to say, as he presently did:

"I don't a bit like being Lord Leonard; I think it's an awful bore!"

He was rebuked for talking in that way, which was stigmatised as "very silly and childish." It was pointed out to him that to be Lord Leonard was at least to be "somebody" (one must perhaps be somebody in order to appreciate at its full value the inestimable privilege of being nobody), and that it likewise entailed the putting away of childish things. What it apparently did not at all imply was any relaxation of discipline or any diminution of the obedience due to elders and betters. Mrs.

Leonard had thought the whole thing out in the course of a few hours' railway journey; she more or less saw her way, and to her way her son must necessarily conform. She was a very able, self-possessed, quietly insistent lady.

Collaterals, lawyers, agents, stewards—a whole host of bewildered functionaries and hangers-on—were destined to find her so and to bow, not unwillingly, to her behests. There was really nobody else who, in a totally unforeseen situation and in the absence of precise instructions relating hitherto, was qualified or entitled to take the lead, nor did she encounter any opposition. The arrangements for the triple obsequies which had to be solemnised in a vast crowd were undertaken by her and efficiently carried through; the reading of the late Lord Leonard's will, which proved by force of circumstances to be a practically inoperative document, left her in legal command; Leonard's End, with everybody and everything involved in the possession of that property, accepted her regency from the outset. Easily and at once she became a personage in the county and remained for many years a highly influential personage, respected, admired and, in a modified sense, beloved. After the funeral rites, the new Lord Leonard, who had figured in the same and had produced a fairly favourable impression as a somewhat forlorn little chief mourner, addressed a modest request to her.

"Mother, would you mind my asking Morant to come and shoot in September?"

"You are too young," Mrs. Leonard answered, "to issue invitations in your own name. Besides, I do not know who Morant is."

"He is a pal of mine and an awfully good fellow."

"I suppose you mean that he is a friend and a school-fellow of yours; 'pal' is a vulgar term which I would rather not hear you use. Well, if he is one of the Dorsetshire Morants, if he can be trusted with a gun and if he will not interfere with your studies, I see no objection to his being asked."

"I promised," pleaded the boy, adding presently,

"And September is a holiday month for everybody, you know."

"Promises," observed his mother, "ought always to be kept, although they should not be lightly given. I will make inquiries about your young friend. Bear in mind, however, that great landowners, even while they are in their minority, cannot consistently with duty, take long or frequent holidays."

They very habitually do; but it may be said of this rather exceptional landowner that up to his dying day he availed himself but little of privileges which he might have claimed. During the adolescent period, at all events, he was—wisely or unwisely—inured to hard work and denied all luxuries, save such as inevitably belonged to the stately ordering of his daily existence. To the end he never ceased to regret the sea, nor to yearn mutely and vainly for his forfeited insignificance.

CHAPTER II

Miss Juliet Vyse

MRS. LEONARD had ideas upon the subject of education. It is a subject upon which most people have ideas; but these are, as a rule, quite harmless, inasmuch as most people are effectually restrained by the almost irresistible trammels of use and wont from putting them into practice. Young England, in the upper-class sense of that term, goes through the mill which has turned out so many generations of its forefathers and emerges after the fashion that we see—not learned, perhaps not even adequately instructed, yet with the acquisition of certain qualities and characteristics which have their very definite value. What may have been a little unfortunate for the new Lord Leonard was that his mother was in the unusual position of having a practically free hand with regard to him. Duly constituted colleagues in his guardianship were appointed for her; but hers was always the determining voice, and all they ever did in discharge of their functions was to say ditto to her. What could she do?—what could anybody have done in her place? It was, as she had said, too late to send him to Eton or Harrow, and rather than expose him to the hazardous possibilities of private tuition away from home, she resolved to conduct the training process under her own eye and with the aid of the best pedagogues obtainable for money. Such a process could not in the nature of things be wholly satisfactory; she rendered it less so than it need have been by the stringency of the methods which she prescribed. The ideal landowner is, no doubt, easily definable; but possibly it may be said of him, as of a poet, *nascitur, non fit*. It is, at any rate, hardly by snatching a would-be sailor

out of his predestined groove and dinning the nature of his terrestrial duties perpetually into his ears that the ideal is likely to be evolved.

The poor lad had had a severe, cheerless, solitary youth, of which he did not complain, yet which left its indelible mark upon him through life. He was taught many things, and was taught them as well as could be managed by a succession of able instructors; he developed a certain studious, literary aptitude and (for Mrs. Leonard was too shrewd a woman to ignore the indispensable demands of sport) became a fair horseman and shot: what he missed—and what happened to be essential in the case of one of his temperament—was companionship. Archie Morant (was proved, on inquiry, to be one of the Dorsetshire Morants and therefore eligible) was indeed permitted to spend a month with him and to walk up partridges in his company, escorted by a watchful keeper; but Archie passed out midshipman from the *Britannia*, was despatched forthwith to the North American station and came to Leonard's End no more. He answered one or two of his faithful chum's letters and then fell silent. He had no successor, nor in truth could he have had any; for such young fellows as were domiciled in the neighbourhood did not take much to the solemn, shy boy who had but few holidays in the course of the year and who was sensitively reluctant to thrust himself upon them. In short, the Lord Leonard who eventually matriculated and took up his residence at Christ Church was not all that his painstaking mother could have wished him to be. She had moulded him only too well; she had inducted him with a very strong sense of the duties and responsibilities attaching to his station; he was not, she felt comfortably sure, in any danger of bringing sorrow upon her by breaking out into extravagance or debauchery; yet—he was, somehow, not a success. She realised that, and was secretly provoked with him; he also realised it, and was saddened. They both, it may be, longed for the unattainable; they both felt that so young, wealthy and distinguished a personage as Lord Leonard ought to be easily popular; and popular, poor fellow, he never was. His mother was of

opinion that he had incurably bad manners; he himself only knew (and could at times have wept with the miserable consciousness of it) that he was unsympathetic.

Oxford, of course, did something for him. He made sundry acquaintances—friends they could scarcely be called—who accepted the hospitality which he was allowed to extend to them; his horizon became widened, and, being in some respects malleable, he assimilated that prevailing tone of his day which it would have been too absurd of him to fail in catching; but, in spite of all, he remained a lone figure. From start to finish the real man was oddly detached from his actual life; from first to last his heart was at sea, far away on the broad ocean which had acquired for him the glamour of passionately desired, forbidden things. Somewhere in his diary he says—half-dejectedly, half-humorously, as usual—"I can't imagine what Providence was thinking about when my soul was allotted to my body; I seem so very much like the outcome of an oversight. And yet, God knows, I have tried hard enough to accommodate myself to difficult circumstances! Perhaps, when all is over, the reason of my tragi-comic failure may be revealed to me, although it will then have only an academic interest."

It was soon after his twentieth birthday that life suddenly assumed for him the species of interest which is known by experience to every mortal of that age or upwards. He was at home for Christmas, acting as host to a houseful of people invited by his mother; some of his mother's guests had accompanied him out hunting, but at the close of the short winter day he had lost sight of them and, which was more to be regretted, had, owing to a series of mishaps, likewise lost the hounds. He had just made up his mind that there was nothing for it but to make for the nearest road and jog back when he became aware that somebody on the farther side of a ragged fence a couple of hundred yards or so away was waving forlorn signals to him with a hunting-crop, and at the same time there reached his ear, through the moist, misty air, inarticulate sounds as of a female voice imploring help. He cantered across an intervening stretch of plough, put his

horse at a gap in the hedge, and, receiving too late a hasty cry of warning, narrowly escaped the disaster which had overtaken his predecessor.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, drawing a long breath, "I was afraid you were going to come to grief as I did. I didn't think you would try to jump it, although of course you were as little prepared as I was to find this hideous ditch on the other side."

She was a tall, fair-haired girl whom he remembered to have seen at the meet—the daughter, somebody had told him, of a certain General Vyse who had recently succeeded to a property in the neighbourhood. Little susceptible though he was to feminine charms (for women, as a rule, frightened him and he had already made the dismaying discovery that a large proportion of them were quite undisguisedly desirous of marrying him), he had been struck at the moment by Miss Vyse's remarkable beauty, and this impression was renewed, despite the unbecoming aspect under which he now beheld her, with a broken hat, a torn habit and mud-plastered cheeks. Stiff and stark at her feet lay the little bay horse whom she had managed with noticeable grace and dexterity earlier in the day and whom she now apprehensively indicated with an outstretched finger.

"Would you mind looking at him?" she asked. "Is he—do you think he is—dead?"

There could be no question about that; but Leonard, who had dismounted, made brief investigations.

"I am sorry to tell you," said he, looking up, "that your horse has broken his neck. Well, that's better for him, poor beast, than if he had broken his back, you know."

This consolatory reminder was added hastily, awkwardly and in accents of almost angry protest; for there seemed every reason to fear that Miss Vyse was about to burst into tears. And indeed, undeterred by her companion's obvious discomfort, she did for a few minutes give way to not unnatural emotion, he meanwhile standing beside her, erect and mute, really very sorry, yet hopelessly at a loss for appropriate words. At length, much to his relief, she

began to laugh, which was quite the last thing that he had expected her to do.

"You look so funny!" she explanatorily and apologetically observed. And then: "Oh, I know! It's horrid when people start crying and when one doesn't know them well enough to tell them not to make fools of themselves. But don't be alarmed: I have done now."

"I don't at all wonder at your being distressed," the young man managed to say.

"I am sure you wouldn't if you knew what a dear, good little horse he was. And I can't bear to think that it is I who have killed him by asking an impossibility of him."

"You couldn't tell that it was an impossibility," returned Leonard, beginning to feel more at his ease; "hounds were running, I suppose, when you rode at the fence."

"Oh, of course; and although they were a field or two ahead of me, I thought I was only doing what other people must have done. I was sent flying and fell clear; but I was 'knocked silly,' as they say. I wasn't quite certain what had happened when I came to myself and caught sight of you in the distance."

"I'm very glad I was there to be caught sight of," he declared, a little surprised at himself both for being glad and for having the audacity to say so.

"Well, yes; it was fortunate," she agreed. "Though, after all, I don't quite see what you can do for me."

What he could do, and what, with some little difficulty, he did, was to remove her saddle from her dead horse and to place it upon the back of his own, thus enabling her, should such be her good pleasure, to ride straight home, and it was characteristic of him to suggest a course which she was bound, in ordinary proper feeling, to scout.

"What?—and leave you to tramp all the way to Leonard's End, with your saddle on your arm!" she exclaimed.

"You know that I live at Leonard's End, then?" said he interrogatively.

"Of course I know who you are; doesn't everybody know? But you can't be expected to know that I am a humble person of the name of Vyse and that I live at a

place called Old Park, only about two miles away from this."

"If Old Park is not more than two miles away," he returned, again surprising himself by his own temerity, and failing to perceive that she had rendered his response quite inevitable, "wouldn't the simplest plan be for me to walk there beside you and change saddles again at the end of the walk?"

She agreed that that plan would have the advantage of simplicity. She likewise owned to having been somewhat shaken by her fall and to a disinclination for trudging a couple of miles across country in her riding-habit. Nevertheless, she had scruples and felt bound to utter expressions of gratitude from which she desisted when she saw how very uncomfortable they were making her shy rescuer. He, on his part, apologised rather gruffly for compelling her to travel at a foot's pace; but she assured him that she did not mind that.

Would any unmarried young woman in the country have minded it? He may have put the question to himself (for even at that early age he was an inveterate seeker after truth) while he plodded along by her side through the deepening twilight; but long ere they reached their destination he had arrived at the happy conviction that this beautiful, amiable, easy-mannered Miss Vyse was not as other young women are. Possibly she was not: at all events she did not, in the course of conversation, behave as other young women had of late so disquietingly begun to do. Conversation was at first carried on almost exclusively by her; but gradually she drew him out and soon they were exchanging something in the nature of confidences. She told him that she was one of a large family, not too well off, though much improved in circumstances by their late acquisition of a modest estate; she mentioned that they had hitherto, for economical and educational reasons, resided a good deal abroad; she briefly described her parents, her brothers and her sisters, and confessed that, much as she enjoyed hunting, the idea of spending the rest of her days in the dignified monotony of English country life appalled her.

"But I daresay that won't happen to me," she quite innocently and unaffectedly added.

He was persuaded, in return, to give her some account of himself, of how bored he was by his big position, how solitary, how destitute of genuine friends. She listened, with an air of half-amused comprehension and kindly compassion, until at length—making a sudden forward stride, after the fashion of shy folk whose shyness has been temporarily dispelled—he blurted out:

"Do you know, Miss Vyse, I believe we might be great friends, you and I, if—if you were so disposed."

"Oh, that remains to be seen," she laughed; "we are scarcely out of the preliminary stage yet, are we? Though I must say that you have begun by playing the part of a friend in need."

He was so easily snubbed that the above very mild discouragement sufficed to put him to silence, and on their arrival at the entrance gates of Old Park, a substantial red-brick mansion which stood at no great distance from the high road, his unwillingness to enter and be thanked by General and Mrs. Vyse was manifested with such unequivocal candour that she was fain to dismount, deposit her saddle at the lodge and take leave of him. After all, it was for Lord Leonard to decide whether or not the initiated acquaintance should assume a more formal character.

He said at parting that he would give instructions, on his way home, for the transport of the poor little bay horse's remains to Old Park, and so rode off—not yet definitely in love with Miss Vyse, but pretty plainly destined, at her will, to become so.

He became so definitely, as a matter of fact, some ten days later, when General and Mrs. Vyse, with their eldest unmarried daughter, were included in one of the dinner-parties by means of which Mrs. Leonard periodically discharged her duty to her neighbours.

"Quite nice people," that lady remarked, on being informed of her son's little adventure; "there have been Vyses at Old Park for two hundred years or more, I believe. I have exchanged cards with them, and they are coming to dine on I forget what evening. The daughter

is pretty, they tell me. Tiresome for her to lose her horse, and still more tiresome for you to be obliged to mount her on yours; but hunting women are always liable to get themselves and others into trouble. Girls didn't hunt when I was young, and wouldn't hunt now if they had intelligence enough to understand their proper vocation."

She disposed of the incident in that airy style. She had no fears with regard to her son's affections, seeing that the time had not yet come to seriously contemplate a matrimonial alliance for him, and that she counted upon his more or less willing acquiescence in her wishes when that time should come. There are, of course, plenty of spoilt children in the world; but of spoilt parents—a far more unmanageable race—only a few specimens exist, and Mrs. Leonard belonged to the latter category. So habituated was she to getting her own way that she accepted that way as the only one worth taking into practical account, and indeed she had solid grounds for that assumption. Nobody who knew her and her son would have dreamed of backing the nominal head of the family in the event of a conflict between them.

Nevertheless, he lost his heart to the divinely tall, divinely fair Juliet Vyse without stopping to wonder whether his mother would let him or no. It was perhaps her singing that did it; for he had a sensitive musical ear, while her admirable voice, admirably produced and trained by the best professors in foreign capitals, was of an order rarely met with in these islands. She sang to the company after dinner, achieved a success which may have been due rather to the volume than to the exquisite quality and management of her organ, and reduced her grave, silent host to a permanently kneeling posture at her feet.

Not, to be sure, in a literal sense; he was far too diffident, too lacking in self-confidence for that. Yet he realised that he had encountered his fate and that if he did not eventually marry Juliet Vyse, he would at least never love anybody else. Probably she, on her side, was not unconscious of having made a conquest which was evidenced

by remarkably little in the shape of overt demonstration; for she was a bright, intelligent girl and, although she was but nineteen years of age, opportunities had been given her of studying the male sex. She was not in any special degree attracted by this reticent youth; still his attentions, such as they were, could not but flatter her, and she thought it rather nice of him, with his historic title, his lands and his great income, to be so absurdly modest.

"I suppose," she could not help saying, during the progress of a private colloquy which had been brought about by his seating himself abruptly in front of her, "it hasn't yet dawned upon you that you are a territorial magnate of the first water."

"Oh, that has dawned upon me," he answered, with the evanescent, vaguely rueful smile habitual to him; "if I didn't know myself for a territorial magnate by this time, I should be blind and deaf indeed. But what then?"

"Nothing, perhaps, except that it behoves you to give yourself proportionate airs."

"Well, if you think I ought, I'll try. I don't quite see why I should, though."

"Only because everybody in this world is so apt to be taken at his or her own valuation," replied the experienced young lady.

Lord Leonard considered for a moment. "What a bad lookout for me!" he remarked. "Won't you, in this instance, depart from the general custom and put your personal estimate upon me?"

"Yes, as soon as I am able to form one; but my personal estimate won't count for much, I am afraid."

"If yours doesn't, nobody's will," he rejoined.

He had the oddest way of coming out with these bold announcements and then retreating precipitately into his shell. Possibly he thought that he had gone far enough for one evening; at any rate, he remained defiantly reserved and stiff during the remainder of it. If General and Mrs. Vyse, who deemed themselves beholden to the young man and were courteously anxious to acknowledge their obligation, had any complaint to make of him, it certainly was not on the score of his omission to assume

airs corresponding to his social standing. In their opinion, he was almost rude, and they gathered that he wished to see no more of them—a perfectly legitimate conclusion, although an erroneous one. As a matter of fact, he rather liked the grey-bearded old gentleman and the little, faded old lady to whose advances he responded in monosyllables and who were, as his mother had pronounced them, “quite nice people;” but they did not interest him, and it was one of his many misfortunes that he was never, all his life long, able to feign an interest where he felt none.

After such of the guests as were not staying in the house had departed, Mrs. Leonard thought it right to take her son to task.

“You should endeavour to be a little more civil to our neighbours, Leonard,” said she. “Even if some of them are rather dull, you should remember that that is the case in all country neighbourhoods, and really the Vyses seem to me to be above, not below, the average of their class.”

“Wasn’t I civil to them?” he wonderingly asked.

“I am sure you did not give them that impression. You so seldom do convey that impression, alas!”

He was aware of only too seldom doing so, and his penitence was sincere. He might, however, have been consoled had he been informed of the impression that he had conveyed to Miss Juliet, who already understood him a good deal better than her parents—or, for the matter of that, than his own mother—did.

CHAPTER III

Limited Independence

GENERAL VYSE was a good-humoured old gentleman, not in the least prone to take offense where none was meant; but he certainly did think that young Lord Leonard had been rather markedly deficient in cordiality to him, and he therefore refrained from making any further advances when they next met, a few days later, at the covert-side. The young man, however, at once ranged up alongside of him and began interrogatively:

"Your daughter is not out to-day?"

The General laughed. "She has, unfortunately, the best of reasons for staying at home, poor girl! I daresay it wasn't altogether her fault that she managed to kill her mount the last time she followed the hounds; but then it isn't mine that I can't afford to replace him just at present. I might pick up a screw cheap for her, it's true; but"—

"Oh, you mustn't think of doing that," interrupted the other hastily; "in such a country as this it wouldn't be safe."

"Exactly so. The next spill might be fatal to her own neck, and, inconveniently large as my family is, I don't wish to reduce its numbers in that way. So I am afraid Juliet will have to postpone her hunting until next season."

"Unless she cared to take a horse I want to get rid of. He has perfect manners, is quite sound, is a clever fencer and has carried a lady. May I send him over for her to try?"

The General hoped it was not impertinent to inquire

why Lord Leonard was anxious to get rid of a sound horse who was a clever fencer and had perfect manners.

"Well, I doubt whether he is quite up to my weight," answered the young man, who, although rather more than six feet in height, had not an ounce of superfluous flesh on his slight frame and who must at this time have ridden under twelve stone. It was as near an approach to a lie as he could compass, and the utterance of it caused him to look sheepish; but his visible embarrassment was, naturally enough, misconstrued. General Vyse politely thanked him, accepted his kind suggestion and wondered what was wrong with the animal.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with the handsome, well-bred, clean-limbed chestnut which a groom rode over to Old Park on the following day, and which subsequently carried Miss Vyse in triumph to the close of the very best run that she had ever enjoyed in the course of her brief experience. He had no discoverable defects, that is to say, save the only too obvious one of being quite out of the question. General Vyse stated as much, with a regretful sigh, while on the homeward way in the dusk of evening.

"My dear fellow," said he (for the day's sport had furnished episodes of a nature to foster the growth of familiarity between him and one of his companions), "I can't even make you an offer, worse luck! If you were to send that horse up to Tattersall's this week, you would be certain of getting at least double the price for him that my poor means allow me to contemplate. Why you want to sell him I can't imagine; but it is very evident to me that there wouldn't be the slightest use in my wanting to buy him."

"Oh, but I don't want to sell him," his rather maladroit owner declared. "He is a game horse, and, as I have no personal use for him, my object was to find him a good home, if I could. So I was in hopes that he might suit Miss Vyse, and—and—he *does* suit you, doesn't he?"

This superfluous query was addressed to the young lady who had just won her first brush, and who answered, with

a suggestion of annoyance in her laugh, "I am afraid that is neither here nor there, Lord Leonard."

It was too stupid of him to make rejection of his delightful offer unavoidable by putting it forward in that unequivocal style; but she was, of course, powerless to bring a sense of his stupidity home to him. Her father promptly undertook that task.

"Eh?—make us a present of the horse? Very kind of you, I'm sure, very kind indeed; but—I hope you'll excuse a man of my age for telling you that such things aren't done. You will understand why when you have lived a few more years in an inquisitive, censorious world. Many thanks to you, all the same, my dear fellow."

This more than sufficed to reduce to crushed silence a would-be donor, who, despite his tender years, understood why gifts, coming from him, might be pronounced unacceptable. He muttered something incoherent, changed the subject and reverted to the coldly distant manner which the various excitements of the chase had led him to discard. But when the time came for him to take leave of his friends he profited by the circumstance of General Vyse's having ridden on a few yards ahead to say in a low voice to Miss Juliet:

"I am sorry you won't have the chestnut, and I apologise for what seems to have been a piece of impertinence on my part. I don't know that asking you to take him off my hands would be considered impertinent."

"Oh, nobody considers you impertinent," she rather drily returned; for she was still a good deal vexed with an admirer who knew so ill how to express his admiration and who, with just a little tact, could so easily have enabled her to please herself as well as him.

"Only you don't choose to be ever so slightly beholden to me? Well, as I said before, I am sorry, that's all."

"So am I," the young lady declared, with perfect truth and perceptible impatience. She added, in somewhat mollified accents, "Let me thank you, nevertheless, for having given me a glorious day."

"Which, according to your father, is likely to be the

only day, glorious or otherwise, that you will have with the hounds this winter."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Half a loaf is better than no bread. Besides, hunting isn't, fortunately, one's sole resource. There are other possible amusements and enjoyments."

He would fain have inquired to what amusements and enjoyments she thus darkly alluded; but he had neither the requisite courage nor the time for so doing. The General called out a cherry "Good-night," Miss Juliet, touching her horse with her heel, nodded to him, and he turned tail, vaguely jealous, definitely and absurdly conscious of implied rejection. Timidity and pride, humility and conceit are so closely allied that anybody who likes to take that view of the young man's character is quite entitled to ascribe his despondency to a morbid, exaggerated vanity; yet he never in truth suffered from any form of this common malady, although it has very frequently been imputed to him. His melancholy conviction at the time was that the girl whom he already worshipped did not care a button for him, and indeed the chances are that he was not far wrong there. It was, however, unnecessary to assume further, as he did, that she wished to see no more of him. What spinster in England—be she never so beautiful, never so attractive, never so magnificently disinterested—deprecates intimacy with an unmarried, wealthy and subservient peer of the realm?

But Lord Leonard, to be sure, was still in leading-strings, while his mother, it might be taken for granted, had matrimonial ambitions respecting his future. Miss Vyse, if not wholly ignorant of the conquest which she had achieved, valued this at what it might be worth—which was obviously not much—and accepted without disturbance of equanimity the sterile results thereof. He soon returned to his studies at the University, having made no attempt to see her again, and, since she was not in love with him, nothing was easier than to dismiss him from her thoughts. Moreover, as matters fell out, she was furnished with aids to oblivion by the kindly

action of a relative who, being widowed, rich and alone, offered to take charge of her during a London season. Such chances are not to be refused by young women whose parents cannot afford the luxury in question, nor did Miss Juliet wait to be asked twice. Thus many months elapsed before she was once more brought into contact with one who throughout those months had been dreaming of her daily, not to say hourly.

That he idealised her in his dreams was a matter of course: he would have done that, had she been a much less promising subject for idealisation than she actually was. She was not, perhaps, all that his fancy painted her; yet the unbiassed narrator may fairly say that she was a nice girl, as girls go—good-tempered, well-intentioned, well-principled, by no means stupid, and of a beauty quite incontestable. Leonard was not in the least disappointed in her when at length he had the bliss of shaking her by the hand once more. This was on the occasion of the festivities which attended his coming of age in the ensuing autumn and which culminated in a ball at Leonard's End, whereat the entire nobility and gentry of the county assembled in their best clothes. She was prevailed upon to dance with him three times, although he was a shocking bad dancer and knew himself for what he was; she was very pleasant, friendly and chatty; he could not help hoping that she rather liked him, notwithstanding her significantly frank friendliness.

"I don't suppose," said he, in his abrupt way, "that you have missed me a bit all this long time."

She laughed and confessed that she had not exactly yearned for him. "I have been away from home almost ever since I saw you last," she explanatorily added, "and I couldn't very well miss you in London, where we have never met, could I?"

"As far as that goes," he returned, "I have never had the happiness of meeting you at Oxford."

"And, in spite of that, an Oxford undergraduate has paid me the compliment of missing me? How flattering!"

"It isn't a question of flattery; I am no use at flatter-

ing people. I don't forget the people whom I care for, that's all."

This boast seemed to amuse Miss Vyse, who laughed again before inquiring, "Am I reproached for forgetting you or for not caring for you?"

"You aren't reproached for anything; what possible right could I have to reproach you? I only wondered whether you had sometimes given me a thought."

She looked at him curiously, while he drew himself up and frowned, which was his method of exhibiting the bashfulness which alternated in so quaint a fashion with his temerity. He was at once transparently intelligible and perplexing. He could not but mean her to understand that he was smitten with her, nor could she fail to be a little exhilarated by consciousness that she had the hero of the hour at her feet; but as for serious intentions—well, it was at least doubtful whether he would be permitted to harbour serious intentions. She remarked, after a pause:

"So now you are your own master."

"Oh, nominally," was his opposite reply to an implied query which he may or may not have felt to be pregnant. "In the eyes of the law I am an independent being; but for all practical purposes I have got to do as I am told. I suppose that is the case even with despotic sovereigns, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Yes, I daresay it is. Are you sufficiently emancipated and sufficiently short of amusements to come over and play lawn-tennis with us one of these afternoons?"

He jumped at the suggestion like a trout at a dry fly. "Oh, may I? Of course I should like nothing better."

He did not, in the sequel, like it quite as much as he had expected; for Miss Juliet was one of a very large family, and her juvenile brothers and sisters had no notion of discreetly absenting themselves during the intervals of play. Still, it was something to be admitted, as he speedily was, to their unqualified intimacy. Day after day he rode over to Old Park, no one forbidding him, and took his share in a series of hotly contested

matches, with Juliet always for his partner. The boys and girls who were their opponents carried on the struggle with very great seriousness; Juliet herself was an enthusiastic performer at a game which had in those times reached the summit of its popularity; the old people looked on at the young people, and gave them tea during the brief interval allowed for refreshments. It was all pleasant enough; only it afforded very few opportunities to one who was deeply, not to say ostentatiously, in love.

General and Mrs. Vyse either did not see or preferred to ignore what was so patent. Perhaps they did not feel called upon to discourage the visits of an eminently desirable suitor; perhaps, too, their daughter's demeanour may have given them a certain comfortable sense of freedom from responsibility. For if it was visible that this pale, grave youth had lost his heart to Juliet, it was equally so that she had not yet lost hers to him. Why, indeed, should she? He was not bad looking; but, setting his extrinsic advantages aside, he was scarcely the sort of person to carry by assault the affections of a girl who was universally admired; so that little harm would have been done in the highly probable event of his being constrained after a time to transfer himself and his extrinsic advantages to a more lofty social sphere. Meanwhile, glittering possibilities remained. Thus Juliet's parents may have reasoned, and thus, no doubt, the majority of parents in their situation would have reasoned.

Parental duties and obligations presented themselves in a somewhat different light to Mrs. Leonard as soon as that masterful lady found out what was going on. Honouring a garden-party at Old Park, one afternoon, with her presence, she noticed that her son never left Miss Vyse's side unless compelled to do so, nor quitted her with his eyes even then, and, although more amused than alarmed, she deemed it well to breathe a word in season to her hostess.

"Your daughter," she remarked, in patronising, but quite good-humoured accents, "is an extremely pretty girl, and so my son appears to think. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind his thinking her pretty?" returned the other lady nervously; for she was constitutionally timorous and Mrs. Leonard always overawed her.

"I meant that I hoped you didn't mind his telling her so. Oh, not in plain words, of course! Mere boy though he is, and unimportant as anything that he might be silly enough to say would be, he would not, I know, have the impertinence to do that. Still, he ought not to behave as he is doing, and I should be very sorry if he were to give you any cause, however trifling, for uneasiness by his conduct."

"I don't feel at all uneasy," Mrs. Vyse declared, becoming a little pink and plucking up the sort of courage which a hen bird so pathetically assumes when her offspring are insulted or menaced. "It has been a great pleasure to us to see Lord Leonard here, and I hope he has enjoyed his games of tennis with our children; but he is, as you say, a mere boy. Juliet, who has seen plenty of young men lately and who has, between ourselves, refused more than one good offer of marriage, has never, I am sure, dreamt of regarding him in any other light."

"Indeed? So much the better, then. At the same time, it is perhaps just as well that he will be going off to Scotland for deer-stalking in a few days and that he will not return home again during the long vacation."

"Oh!—he did not tell us that he was going to Scotland," was Mrs. Vyse's surprised and rather foolish comment upon an announcement which vaguely mortified her.

"That," observed the more self-possessed matron drily, "may have been because he did not know he was going. But it is in many ways advisable that he should go. All these things are part and parcel of his necessary training."

All what things? The young man put that question to his mother while they were driving away together and when, in informing him that he would be welcomed shortly at the Highland shooting-lodge of a certain cousin of theirs, she reiterated the above phrase. Her compendious reply was:

"The things which belong to your station in life. In

Scotland you will be thrown with people of your own station; the people with whom you have been thrown of late scarcely come into that category."

"If you mean the Vyses," he protested, "surely they are as good as we are!"

"In one sense they may be a great deal better; in another they cannot quite take rank as our equals. I am not a worldly woman, nor, so far as I am aware, has anybody ever called me a snob; but we must take the world as we find it and recognise distinctions which have not been created by us. Miss Vyse, for instance, is a charming young lady; yet she is not by position one of those whom I should wish to see you choose as your future wife."

"Oh," returned Leonard, with a short, rueful laugh, "you need not disquiet yourself on that score; she wouldn't accept me if I asked her."

"I am sincerely glad to hear it. I think, nevertheless, that, for her sake as well as your own, these daily visits of yours had better cease."

He was inclined to the opinion that—for his sake, at any rate—they had better cease. He had, as it chanced, been snubbed that afternoon; he was dejected, dispirited, almost certain that Juliet's indifference was unconquerable. Otherwise, submissive though he was, he might have kicked against that deer-stalking project, which did not attract him; for he had, somewhere deep down in his internal economy, a will of his own, with which his mother was destined to make ultimate acquaintance. He gave her just a hint of its existence by remarking:

"I am not going to marry a girl whom I don't love, whatever her social position may be."

"At the age of one-and-twenty," Mrs. Leonard boldly affirmed, "it is impossible for any man to know whether he is really in love or not."

He did not dispute that authoritative assertion; he did not confide in his mother, who indeed never encouraged him to be confidential. In her view, doubtless, the essential thing was that he should obey her, and this he was apparently just as ready to do, now that he had passed

beyond the stage of tutelage, as he had been throughout his childhood and boyhood. She flattered herself, not without reason, that he realised how much better qualified she was to order the course of his life for him than he could be, if left to his own devices.

He paid, a few days later, a visit of farewell to Old Park, which entirely confirmed his melancholy conviction as to Miss Vyse's sentiments.

"I shall really miss you this time," she declared, with a bright smile which belied her polite statement. "The only consolation is that at the present season of the year a few wet days are enough to put a final stop to lawn-tennis."

"You won't," he sorrowfully remarked, "regret my absence half as much as I shall regret it."

She shrugged her shoulders and raised her eyebrows. "Then, if it isn't an impertinent question, why absent yourself?"

"Because I am not wanted here, and because there would be no use in my staying on," he answered.

"Not because you want to shoot stags, then, nor because you have received marching orders? Well, we must try to replace you with the curate, who has a telling overhand service."

Had he possessed so much as an elementary acquaintance with the ways of Miss Vyse's sex, he must have perceived that her pride was wounded, even if her heart remained immune, and he would have congratulated himself upon that small victory, such as it was. But as women were more or less of a sealed book to him all his life long, he congratulated himself upon nothing and went his way. He left a slightly piqued and mortified young lady behind him.

CHAPTER IV

Fortune Smiles

THE earliest pages of Lord Leonard's diary date from the period which intervened between the attainment of his majority and the taking of his degree, and are perhaps of rather more interest to his biographer than they would be to the general reader. This very full, absolutely frank and sometimes touching record served him, it is easy to perceive, in lieu of the intimate friend or friends whom he does not seem to have made at the University or elsewhere. It exhibits him as something of a student, a little of a poet (the verses which he published in later years and of which, strange to say, he himself always thought highly, had but a meagre success), an observer of occasional shrewdness and a most kindly, honourable, imutably melancholy young man. As throwing light upon the formation of a somewhat difficult character these closely written sheets repay perusal; but for narrative purposes there is not much to be done with them. When it has been said that the writer, throughout that comparatively long time, never wavered in his allegiance to a divinity whom he seldom saw, and whom measures were evidently taken to prevent him from often seeing; when it has been added that, for the rest, his life resembled in most respects that of other youths of his class, this portion of his history may be dismissed as practically told.

He emerges as a more manageable leading actor in the spring of the year which witnessed his introduction to London society and his acquisition of a fine house in Grosvenor Place, wherein he took up his residence with the austere, albeit resplendent, lady who affected to efface

herself in his favour and to allow him a free hand, while taking the head of his table and selecting his numerous guests for him. Had Mrs. Leonard been anxious likewise to select a bride for him, she would have had no other embarrassment than that of choosing one out of a multitude, for skilled financial supervision had by that time made him a very rich man; but it may be that she was in no very great hurry to retire into the background. What she repeatedly assured him was that in the matter of matrimony she wished him to consult the dictates of his own heart—subject, of course, to the limitations imposed upon him by his station. These, it may be assumed, excluded Miss Vyse, whom chance, or what had all the appearance of chance, had kept him from meeting in the country for a long time past, and with whom nothing but chance brought him once more into contact at a London crush.

"One has to plunge into this dense crowd, it seems, in order to enjoy the privilege of coming across one's neighbours," was the remark with which he resumed interrupted relations. "Why are you always away when I am at home?"

"Why are you only at home when I am away?" she returned, laughing. "As a matter of fact, I am hardly ever absent for more than a month at a time, and I shouldn't be where I am now if it were not for my cousin Mrs. Raynham, who occasionally takes pity upon my rusticity and asks me to stay with her."

"I am very much obliged to Mrs. Raynham," the young man declared. "Will you introduce me to her and give me an opportunity of telling her so? Oh, but not instantly!" he made haste to add. "Let me first talk to you for a few minutes; that is an opportunity which is not granted to me every day."

It was very willingly granted to him now, and in the solitude which is so easy of attainment wherever large numbers of persons are gathered together these two, who had once been within measurable distance of becoming lovers, were enabled to take rapid stock of one another. Juliet had not changed; nor, if she had, would the change,

in all probability, have been discernible by his eager eyes, which saw what they wanted to see and delighted in seeing. They did not, it is true, behold in hers any reflection of their own questioning tenderness; but that was not a thing to be looked for or expected. If Miss Vyse was still unmarried, this, as Leonard was well aware, was not and could not be because she reciprocated his mute, faithful adoration; yet the fact remained that she had not chosen to marry, and he knew that she had disappointed her parents by declining several alliances which would have satisfied their ambition. He soon perceived, moreover, that she had, as of yore, a liking for him. In that particular, at all events, she had not changed, and his humility asked, for the moment, nothing more.

She, on her side, thought Lord Leonard considerably changed, considerably improved, smartened up, easier in manner, more like other people. His visible admiration did not render him in the least unlike other people, his equally visible and quiet unexpected constancy could not but flatter her, while a strong suspicion that his mother would not have been best pleased to discover him sitting in a corner with her may have enhanced her enjoyment of a colloquy which was protracted for some twenty minutes. In twenty minutes much may be said, and at the expiration of that time Miss Juliet had acquired the certitude (how far he was from imagining that he had been so explicit!) of her power to become, should it so please her, Lady Leonard. In other words, she was practically offered a prospect which very few girls in England would have rejected without thinking twice.

It was creditable to her, and indeed characteristic of her, that she was more disposed to hold that prospect in abeyance than to jump at it. Strange as it may seem, she had never yet fallen in love with any man; although there had been several—Lord Leonard amongst them—towards whom she had felt in a measure drawn. Her idea, which is a common enough idea, with her sex and may even be a correct one, was that she would sooner or later encounter her destined mate, that she would recognise him at first sight, and that it would be a terrible

calamity if she were to recognise him too late. For this reason and for no other she retained her liberty, despite the many favourable occasions which had come in her way of comfortably relinquishing it. But she was beginning to realise that there is such a thing as sacrificing substantial contentment to a vision of problematical bliss; she was neither in her first nor her second season; most of her contemporaries were already established as matrons; her father and her mother had not failed to warn her of the Nemesis which awaits the over-fastidious. Thus the young man who had added to all his other desirable qualities that of a really touching fidelity had presented himself at something like the psychological moment. He was not, so far as she could perceive, the embodiment of her vague dreams; still, she thought him very nice, and of course she introduced him to fat, good-natured Mrs. Raynham, who, scenting romance in the air, promptly asked him to call.

There followed upon this a period of ardent, open, insistent courtship of which the suitor's mother had no cognisance. Mrs. Leonard did not even know that the girl who had at one time, but never very seriously, alarmed her was in London; much less did she imagine that her son was a daily visitor in Chester Square, where Mrs. Raynham lived. Had she asked questions she would doubtless have received truthful answers; but she did not, now that Leonard was a full-grown man, deem it either wise or dignified to inquire too closely how and where his time was spent. It was sufficient for her to feel assured, as she did, that his tastes and habits were in no sense vicious and that he would end by espousing one of the Lady Roses or Lady Violets to whose charms his present insensibility was a matter of no great moment. He was still quite young; of Lady Roses and Lady Violets there would always be an adequate supply; with her vision limited by the boundaries of the set in which she herself sedately moved, she did not so much as suspect the existence of Mrs. Raynhams or Miss Vyses outside these boundaries. For the rest, social gaieties made but a vicarious appeal to one who had never been able to for-

get how completely she had been forgotten by her equals in the hard times gone by. She entertained for Leonard's sake and because it was her clear duty to do so; but she did not go out more than she could help, nor would it have occurred to her for one moment to show herself upon such a scene, for instance, as Ascot race-course, whither her son, with her full approval, betook himself on a fine summer's day. It was, by her way of thinking, only right and fitting that Leonard should go to Ascot, like other distinguished persons: how was she to conjecture that he had made arrangements to do this in company which could not be called distinguished?

If admission to the Royal enclosure may be taken as a symbol of distinction, Mrs. Raynham was enabled to boast of that privilege, and much elated the comely, middle-aged, well-to-do widow was at being escorted thither by so conspicuous a specimen of the juvenile aristocracy as Lord Leonard. It is needless to add that she did not in the least mind being left to take care of herself after luncheon, when the young man whose intentions were no secret to her strolled out of sight and hearing with her *protégé*. She was only too glad to think that he was now coming to the point and that Juliet, after several sterile seasons, was about to be brilliantly provided for.

But Juliet, who, like Mrs. Raynham, foresaw what was coming, was less certain of the issue. She had latterly seen enough of her lover to know him intimately; he had talked to her about himself with such frankness as circumstances had permitted; she felt for him that sentiment of kindly, affectionate compassion which is said—perhaps truly—to be akin to love; also she was fully alive to the brilliancy of the lot which he had it in his power to bestow upon her. Only she wondered whether, if he had not been the great *parti* that he was, she would have cared sufficiently for him to marry him, and she was rather strongly under the impression that she would not. She would fain have claimed a little more time for deliberation; yet she owned to herself that this was scarcely a reasonable claim, and that she would have to make up her mind, one way or the other, forthwith. Now, she was

not quite prepared either to take or to refuse what was, upon the whole, so well worth taking.

To her, thus a prey to vacillation, came in unequivocal language the anticipated avowal. She had allowed herself to be drawn away from the course and the coaches and the booths and the clamorous throng to a spot where, sheltered by a belt of stunted firs, her companion could declare his passion, and the sudden fervour with which he did so was not without a troubling effect upon her senses. She knew that he was speaking the truth; she knew that he had loved her, and her alone, from the day of their first meeting; she had, in honest truth, hardly the heart to disappoint him, nor was it clear to her that, in doing that, she would not also disappoint herself. However, she essayed evasion.

"How horrified," she remarked, smiling, "your mother would be if she could hear you!"

"That," he returned, "has nothing to do with the question."

"Oh, I think it has a little to do with the question. You admit, anyhow, that she would be horrified?"

"Horrified is too strong a word; I daresay she would not be pleased," he truthfully replied. "My mother, I believe, would like me to marry some girl of high rank; but as it is certain that I shall never marry anybody but you, my mother can't possibly have what she would like in this instance. Besides, you are my equal in every way, except that your family does not happen to be titled."

"Most people, I should imagine, would tell you that I am not your equal, and—one has one's humble little pride. Do you suppose that I should enjoy being unwillingly admitted to territory from which I have already been pretty distinctly warned off?"

"I can't, and don't, suppose that you would hesitate if you loved me," was his reply.

She looked down, tracing wavering patterns with the point of her sunshade upon the sandy by-road where they had taken up their station. "If I loved you?" she echoed dubiously.

"Ah, ~~that~~ is the question! That is the only question.

Nothing else signifies, and nothing else would signify, whatever you might be by birth. If you don't love me—and God knows that I haven't the shadow of a right to hope that you do!—tell me so at once, and I won't trouble you with another word."

"You think love on my part is essential, then?"

He turned pale, divining that he was in danger of losing what perhaps he would have been glad to gain on any terms; but he answered unfalteringly:

"Yes, I think it is essential. My love for you would not be worth much if I could endure the idea of its making you unhappy, and I know you could not be happy with a man of my sort unless you cared a great deal for me."

She looked up suddenly and said: "I do care a great deal. Lord Leonard, I want to be perfectly straightforward with you; I want to make you understand, if I can, exactly what my feeling about you is. I am very grateful to you, very appreciative, and I have been fond of you all along, even when I took it for granted that you had ceased to think of me. But—perhaps I am not in love with you. It is so difficult to be sure, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Not in the least, according to my experience."

"Ah, but your experience is unusual—almost unique, I should imagine. Most people make a good many false starts. What I can say is that I haven't made a false start yet; I am only afraid of making one now. I care for you more than I have ever cared for any other man; I care for you enough to hesitate; and I should like you to know that I don't hesitate either because it would be very nice to be promoted as you can promote me or because it would be very disagreeable to brave your mother's certain disapproval."

"Then," he cried triumphantly, "you care enough to hesitate no more. You would never speak like that, Juliet, unless you loved me!"

That she would never have spoken like that if she had loved him seems a more plausible assumption; yet it may be conceded that the species of hesitation which she had

avowed was bound to be overruled. A quarter of an hour later, news was imparted to Mrs. Raynham which caused that worthy woman to raise her double chin and plume herself upon an achievement for which she deserved no credit whatsoever. Indeed, if the jubilant young man had been allowed to have his way, twenty other persons would have learnt there and then that the list of really first-class English bachelors—always so lamentably short—had been curtailed by one since the morning; but he was implored to hold his peace at least until Mrs. Leonard should have been communicated with, and he complied on the ground that she had a right to be informed first, although on no other.

Immediately after his return to London, he went to his mother and told her all about it in a succinct, resolute style which fairly took her breath away. She neither liked the proposed alliance nor pretended to like it; but she had to admit that it was not one which she was entitled to forbid. Moreover, she was respectfully, but quite plainly, given to understand that her veto in such a case would be disregarded. Mrs. Leonard was too sensible a woman to make her hitherto submissive son say that twice. Also—and it is precisely in that respect that her sex differs so fundamentally from ours—she was not wholly displeased by the discovery that her son could, upon occasion, prove himself her master. She said gravely:

"I do not dispute your liberty to choose for yourself, Leonard; I am only sorry that I cannot consider your choice a very wise or a very suitable one. I am sorry, too, that the girl should have behaved in what strikes me as a rather underhand manner. Why was I never told that she was in London and that you were seeing her constantly?"

"Certainly not because she had the slightest desire or motive for concealment," answered the young man. "Any underhand conduct that there may have been must be laid to my charge; although I don't know that I need accuse myself of having wilfully deceived you, mother. You would have been quite welcome, if you had asked

me, to the information that I have been in Chester Square most days of late. More than that I could not have told you; for I had scarcely any hope until to-day that Juliet would accept me."

Mrs. Leonard responded by one of the short, hard laughs which were her rare tributes to the humorous. As if there could have been the faintest likelihood of his being refused! However, she forgave him, seeing no other course open to her, and accepted what she had the wit to perceive that she must eventually accept. It is probable that she did not forgive her future daughter-in-law and supplanter, whom she received, by appointment, on the following day with distant, chilling politeness. It is probable that her sentiments even towards a supplanter of her own selection would not have been warm; for she loved power and hated to relinquish it. Be that as it may, she never took to Juliet Vyse, who never took to her, and a bystander might have foreseen that Lord Leonard had troubles ahead of him. But it was just as well that there were no bystanders, since he assuredly would not at that time have lent an attentive ear to predictions of evil.

CHAPTER V

Bel Ami

THE nation which has no annals is said to be happy, and it was doubtless by reason of his perfect beatitude that Lord Leonard, during the summer which witnessed his betrothal to Juliet Vyse, had very little to confide to his diary. Such sparse entries as are to be found in that usually minute record under date of the months in question are unenlightening, hastily jotted down, and convey the impression that the writer had something pleasanter to do than to analyse his own emotions or those of his beloved. There was in him a quite extraordinary capacity for happiness (as well as the reverse), and he appears at that time to have allowed himself, for once, a perfectly free rein.

He went down to Leonard's End with his mother long before the conclusion of the London season. The House of Lords, which he seldom entered in his youth, presumably did not miss him; disappointed matrons had, after the announcement of his sudden engagement, no further use for him; why should he linger in a city which, so far as he was concerned, ceased to be inhabited from the moment that Juliet returned to her fond and rejoicing parents?

Nobody could blame General and Mrs. Vyse for rejoicing, nor did anybody blame them; although Mrs. Leonard confronted their radiant countenances with something of a frown. She had yielded because she had realised that yield she must; but she did not approve, and her attitude was of a nature to discourage familiarity. Possibly, notwithstanding the fact that the date of the wedding-day had been fixed for September, there may

have lurked at the back of her mind a latent hope that something might even yet happen to preserve her son from throwing himself away. For the rest, she was temporarily powerless, and she knew it. She saw, or thought she saw, that Leonard was infatuated about a girl who, at best, only liked and tolerated him; but she also saw that it would be worse than useless to say so. That queer mixture of piety and fatalism which was the dominant note in her character led her to rely upon an ever-vigilant Providence, to hold her peace and to conceal as well as she was able the strong dislike that she felt for her future daughter-in-law.

Her future daughter-in-law deserved no such sentiment, natural as it was on the latter's part to reciprocate it. To say that Juliet reciprocated Leonard's ecstatic sentiments would, no doubt, be an exaggeration; yet it may at least be affirmed of her that she did not repent of the decision to which she had come. He revealed himself in those (to him) halcyon days as the most unselfish, the most modest, the kindest, largest-hearted of mortals. Viewed as the expansion of his nature, engendered by sunshine, caused him just then to be viewed, it was impossible to help loving him, and there is every reason to believe that Juliet did love him, although there may be some reason to doubt whether she was ever in love with him. He never wearied her; he was never jealous; he was solicitously, pathetically scrupulous about thrusting himself upon her; his one wish was to accede to her wishes, and these, in all truth and sincerity, were that he should spend all the time he could spare at Old Park. A more devoted couple it would have been hard to discover or imagine.

Now it came to pass when the summer was at its height that Leonard was rejoiced by the receipt of a letter from his old friend Archie Morant, whom he had at no time forgotten, but with whom he had long ceased to be in epistolary or other communication. Archie wrote to say that he had come into a small landed estate, that he had dropped sailing, that he had not for the moment anything particular to do, and that he wondered whether so

magnificent a swell as his former chum had become would care to refresh joint memories of boyhood. Because, if so, he thought he could manage to put in a few days at Leonard's End, on his way towards Scotland and grouse. To such an intimation there could, of course, be but one reply, and the warmest of welcomes awaited Mr. Morant when, shortly afterwards, he was deposited for the second time at Lord Leonard's door.

"Well, Leonard," said he, with his old good-humoured, slightly patronising smile, "you are pretty much as you were, I see, except that you have added a considerable number of inches to your stature. I don't detect any symptoms of swelling about your head, which I suspect isn't yet quite big enough to fit your coronet. Well, that's all right—that's just as it should be!"

He clapped the other affectionately on the shoulder and had a little the air of expecting to be told that if he himself was no longer what he had been, that was because he had so beautifully developed.

He had certainly developed and he was certainly beautiful. The length and breadth of Great Britain might have been searched in vain for a specimen of Anglo-Saxon comeliness equal to that which Archie Morant displayed to the eyes of his admiring friends and acquaintances. That the latter were more numerous than the former was due to various circumstances of which one of his earliest admirers remained then and long thereafter in ignorance. Leonard did not know that Mr. Morant had quitted the Royal Navy under the application of a certain amount of pressure; he had not heard that repeated scandals, culminating in a somewhat serious and quasi-public one at Malta, had caused decorous persons to fight shy of a young gentleman whose gambling propensities were not less notorious than his amorous intrigues. As for the "side" to which many people objected, it did not then or subsequently offend him. A being so physically glorious and morally captivating as Archie could scarcely choose but look down upon less favoured fellow-creatures; at what other visual angle is mankind to be surveyed by those who stand upon pinnacles?

"Your friend," Mrs. Leonard drily remarked to her son on the first evening of Mr. Morant's stay, "is self-satisfied and inclined to be impertinent; I recollect thinking him so when he was a boy. But he is very handsome and he belongs to the type which most women find irresistible. I don't think that, if I were a young man and engaged to be married, I should introduce him to my *fiancée*."

But that advice, whether seriously meant or not, could not, of course, be acted upon. Mr. Morant was conducted to Old Park on the following afternoon, and Miss Vyse, while receiving him with her customary amiability, took very little notice of him. He, on his side, was at no great pains to ingratiate himself with Miss Vyse, whom he may have regarded (if indeed he ever so regarded any woman) as forbidden fruit, and who, as he afterwards frankly stated, was "not his style." He was, however, so good as to add that he thought her remarkably well suited in person and manners to the high station which she was destined to occupy and that he was sure she would make an admirable wife and mother.

"Ah! you don't take to her," sighed his friend disappointedly; "and I'm afraid she hasn't taken to you either. It's unfortunate!"

"Not so very, is it?—considering how little we are likely to see of one another in the future."

"Well, but I was in hopes that you would see a good deal of one another. I was in hopes that, after our marriage, we should get you to come and stay with us often."

"My dear fellow, if you'll ask me to your shoots when they come off, you may depend upon my turning up. Does Miss Vyse dislike me so much that she would object to my being invited? I can't imagine why she should. Heaven is my witness that I am very far from disliking her. My humble impression of her is that she is extremely good-looking, extremely well-dressed and—and quite pleasant to talk to."

Leonard laughed. "That is almost word for word what she said about you. I should have liked a little more enthusiasm; but perhaps, after all, that may come.

Can't you give us a few more days? You aren't absolutely bound to be in Scotland by a given date, are you?"

He was bound either to join the sportsmen who had asked him thither on a given date or to throw them over, and his reason for adopting the latter course, which was both uncivil and in apparent antagonism to his own interests, cannot be very easily conjectured. He himself said regretfully, years afterwards, that his evil genius must have had a finger in the pie, and that explanation may suffice if a man's evil genius be understood his ingrained, unbridled perversity. A species of inherent mischievousness rendered Archie Morant ever prone to do the things which he knew he ought not to do, and perhaps he guessed—for he could not at that early stage in the proceedings have felt sure—that prudence counselled his withdrawal from the vicinity of Old Park. What is a matter of history is that he consented to avail himself of Leonard's hospitality for several successive weeks and that during those weeks the faint antipathy which he had conceived for Juliet Vyse at the outset was replaced by an entirely opposite sentiment.

It is likewise a matter of history that during those weeks he behaved unexceptionably: it may have been noticed by the observant that those who are most likely in the long run to work havoc with any established order of things generally do begin by behaving in an unexceptionable manner. Those daily games of lawn-tennis which, as of yore, constituted the staple form of entertainment at Old Park, and which gave Mr. Morant an excellent excuse for keeping his host company, did not bring about any sort of intimacy between him and the rather disdainful young lady against whom he usually found himself pitted; only—owing, no doubt, to her manifest disdain—he fell in love for the twentieth time, and he was a man who, when he fell in love, was apt to be inevitably, even (to give the devil his due) unwittingly, dangerous. Miss Bradstreet, the governess, who was often his partner, and who was a young woman with a beautifully white complexion and hair of a reddish tinge, discovered how things were with him quite as soon as

he himself made the discovery and overcame her timidity, natural or assumed, so far as to remark to him, one afternoon, in an undertone:

"What a pity it is, Mr. Morant, that you are not Lord Leonard!"

"I entirely agree with you," he returned, a little taken aback by this abrupt audacity on the part of one whom he had hitherto regarded as a mere lay figure; "but I don't know why you should think so."

"Only," she replied, modestly lowering her eyes, which corresponded in colour to her hair, "because I sometimes fancy that Miss Vyse thinks so."

Morant turned his head and scrutinised his neighbour. He had never taken the trouble to scrutinise her before, and, be one's position never so humble, one does not, when one is possessed of certain undeniable charms, enjoy being treated as though these had absolutely no existence. An expert in the matter of feminine charms recognised them now and paid homage to them after a fashion by remarking, a trifle impertinently, "Perhaps Leonard thinks it a pity that you are not Miss Vyse."

"Oh, no," the governess returned, with a slight, deprecating smile, "he does not think that. But—perhaps it does not so very much signify what *he* thinks."

After a brief pause, Morant said sharply: "She can't bear the sight of me. She even goes rather out of her way to show that she can't."

At this Miss Bradstreet raised a pair of red-brown eyes and displayed, by laughing, a double row of perfect teeth. "Oh, if you have noticed that she goes out of her way!"—

The conversation was interrupted at this interesting point; but of course it was subsequently renewed, and of course Miss Bradstreet was persuaded, despite ostensible reluctance, to be more explicit. She meant no harm, she declared; all she meant was just what she had said—that it was a pity. Lord Leonard was very nice, and Miss Vyse no doubt liked him very much. "Yet sometimes I am half afraid that she does not really care for him quite as much as he imagines."

Morant shrugged his shoulders. "I expect she does; but really I can't help it if she doesn't."

"Are you sure of that?" the governess asked gravely. "Mr. Morant—don't you think you had better go away?"

It is certain that, whatever may have been her motive for applying a match to inflammable material, this demure incendiary must have known very well that she had adopted the best means of averting Mr. Morant's departure. He made some flippant rejoinder and curtly broke off the colloquy; but from that moment it became a matter of sheer, irresistible necessity to him that he should find out how much or how little foundation there might be for Miss Bradstreet's hints.

"That governess," he remarked to his friend on the homeward way, "seems to be a clever little cat."

"Does she?" asked Leonard indifferently. And then, "Has she been trying to get up a flirtation with you?" She has a sort of underbred, flirtatious manner. I may have been mistaken, but I have fancied once or twice that she was making eyes at me."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Morant, laughing, and changed the subject.

That might be it; yet the possibility of her having correctly diagnosed Miss Vyse's case remained, and Mr. Morant felt it so imperative upon him to undertake a diagnosis on his own score that he lightly flung scruples and loyalty to the winds. Thus was initiated the time-honoured tragi-comedy which has been enacted no one knows how many thousands of times since the world began, and which—human nature being what it is—will continue to be enacted after precisely the same fashion and with an equal sense of irresponsibility on the part of the persons concerned until this little planet ceases to be inhabited. It is manifestly shabby and dishonourable of A. to undermine the happiness of his friend B. because he has become enamoured of C., who is B.'s legitimate property; but the censor has only to find himself in A.'s skin in order to realise that such a course, though conventionally dishonourable, is in the special instance alto-

gether pardonable, not to say inevitable. It did not, alas! take Archie Morant very long to discover that his friend's happiness was at his mercy; nor was he the man to spare a friend so situated. Was not his own happiness more or less at stake, in addition to that of the woman whom he loved?

By what methods, in the employment of which he was highly skilled, he arrived at the above conviction it would be wearisome to describe in detail. Juliet defended herself without skill, snubbed him without discouraging him, betrayed the truth over and over again, while imagining that she had betrayed nothing. If she was compelled, much against her will, to recognise in Mr. Morant the predestined affinity whom she had never really recognised in Lord Leonard, how could she help it? She was miserable; but, since she had no thought of infidelity, her conscience scarcely reproached her. As for Morant, all that can be pleaded on his behalf—which does not, to be sure, amount to very much—was that he must have been genuinely in love to contemplate what he actually did contemplate. For Juliet Vyse was very evidently not indicated as fitted to become the wife of a man both poor and self-indulgent.

Manœuvres and counter-manœuvres, of which Leonard was throughout serenely unconscious, resulted at length, as they were bound to result, in the advent of an occasion. It was at a picnic in Alston Chase, a picturesque, outlying district of Lord Leonard's vast estate, that Juliet, who had wandered away from the rest of the party, was followed and overtaken by one whose company she was far from having invited or desired. She turned her head, as he came stepping briskly towards her through the bracken beneath the spreading trees, and greeted him with a frown of unconcealed annoyance.

"I thought," said she, "you had all of you gone up the hill to look at the view."

"One of us," he smilingly returned, "didn't see the fun of climbing hills in this sultry weather. Did you give us the slip for the same reason, or only because you didn't want to be bothered with us?"

Her significant grimace seemed to intimate regret that she had at any rate failed to secure the latter object. "After all," said she, with an impatient sigh, "perhaps one had better do what other people are doing. Often as I have stared at that view, I suppose my duty is to stare at it once more."

"We will undertake the ascent," he answered, "if you make a point of it; but wouldn't it be much pleasanter and more sensible to sit down here in the shade? What is the use of toiling up hills against the collar and against the grain? What, if it comes to that, is duty? Only, in most cases, a synonym for something which is repugnant. Suppose you do, with infinite labour, manage to reach the top—what happens then? Why, Jack falls down and cracks his crown, and Jill comes tumbling after. I really can't see how it is Jill's duty to cause Jack's disaster, not to mention her own."

"What do you mean, Mr. Morant?" she coldly asked; although of course she knew.

He unhesitatingly told her. Perhaps the secret of his invariable success with women consisted in the invariable directness of his attack at what he deemed to be the ripe instant. He said—and she was unable to contradict him—that she did not love the man whom she had promised to marry; he said she was laying up sorrow for Leonard and remorse for herself; he said what is, unhappily, only too true, that love is an emotion beyond human control and that there is such a thing as unfaithful faithfulness. Archie Morant had, under certain circumstances, a great natural gift of eloquence, and this served him all the better now inasmuch as Juliet was both taken by surprise and aware that she occupied a weak position. Long before he had made an end of speaking she was seated upon the moss-grown roots of an ancient oak, while he lay outstretched by her side and pleaded with her persuasively. *Château qui parle et femme qui écoute!*—her mistake was in having allowed this insidious counsellor to begin. However, she made a fairly courageous resistance. She said:

"I won't call you impertinent, Mr. Morant, because

it is quite possible that you don't mean to be impertinent and you may even mean to be kind; but you have been wasting breath all the same. I have given my word to Lord Leonard and I shall not go back from my word."

"Because he is a lord and because he is so rich?"

"Do I owe you any account of my reasons? Well, then, no!—those are not my reasons. I shall marry him because I admire and respect and—like him more than any other man whom I have ever met."

"All that goes for nothing if you don't love him. And you don't!"

She started suddenly to her feet. "Then had you not better tell him so? You are a disinterested friend of his, I suppose, and it is rather to him than to me that your remonstrances should be addressed."

"You know that that is just the one thing which I cannot possibly do. I don't want the poor fellow to be made miserable; still less do I want you to be made miserable; but it would be out of the question for me to speak to him as I have been speaking to you."

"Why?" she very foolishly and superfluously asked.

"Only because I am not disinterested. Only because I love you, Juliet, and because you know I do. Only because, for all your harshness and cruelty, I believe that in your heart you love me!"

He was so masterful, so confident, so quick to see and push his advantages that he might have wrung an avowal from her, had not Leonard himself appeared at this critical juncture upon the scene to preserve her alike from the humiliation of deceit and the even greater humiliation of veracity. Leonard saw nothing, suspected nothing, feared nothing. He remarked, with a smiling placidity which would have been ridiculous if it had not been so touching:

"I was wondering what you were about, you two. Perhaps you were wondering what I was about?"

"My dear fellow," returned his friend enigmatically and a trifle tartly, "I am always wondering what you are about. But I suppose Miss Vyse doesn't wonder; I suppose she knows and is satisfied."

CHAPTER VI

Miss Bradstreet Lends a Hand

THERE probably was not in all the world a more thoroughly, good-humouredly, irreclaimably selfish being than Archie Morant; and for that very reason his conduct was apt to be ruled by considerations which at first sight might seem to be the reverse of selfish. He knew as well as anybody that to rob his friend of a dowerless bride would be a proceeding most unlikely to conduce to his own material comfort in the future; experience had taught him that love, be it never so ardent while it lasts, is an essentially fugitive passion, and marriage in the abstract had no sort of attraction for him. Yet, because he could not endure to refuse himself anything that he badly wanted, and because he hated the idea of Juliet's ever belonging to another man, he resolved that she should be his, and his alone.

What seemed likely to delay the fulfilment of a project so finely romantic was the imperturbable obstinacy with which she refused to lend herself to it. It would have been reasonable and in accordance with well-ascertained precedent that, after the little scene described in the last chapter, she should give a man the chance of finishing what he had begun to say—if only for the sake of rebuking and contradicting him—but that course apparently did not commend itself to her. She simply behaved as though nothing had happened; she welcomed Mr. Morant neither more nor less cordially than before; she met his eloquent glances without embarrassment and without sign of comprehension; the one small compliment discernible in her attitude was her evident determination not to be left again in his sole society for a moment. He was at first more

amused than discouraged, and was willing to bide his time; but when day followed day without the shadow of an opportunity being offered to him, and when he was forced to recognise that she did not mean to grant him any further opportunities, he began, for once, to lose confidence in himself. Also, as was but natural, his passion, through being thwarted, increased greatly in strength; so that it was almost, if not altogether, in earnest that he at length announced to Leonard his impending departure.

"I have paid you a most unconscionable visit, old man," he said; "but an end must come to everything, and I'm off now."

"It is more than good of you to have put up with our dull country life so long," his guileless friend declared. "I really haven't the face to suggest, as I should like to suggest, your staying on here until my wedding-day. But you will come back to us for it, won't you?"

Archie rather grumpily replied that he would if he could, but that he doubted whether he would be able to manage that. It was, somehow, provoking of Leonard to be so tranquilly unsuspecting; although, of course, it would have been premature and most undesirable to rouse his suspicions. But the question, after all, was how the news of his proposed retreat would affect Juliet, not what Leonard might say or think respecting it; and to this question an answer was forthcoming on the next afternoon, when Leonard, between two games of lawn-tennis, casually remarked:

"Morant is going to desert us the day after to-morrow, I'm sorry to say."

She certainly started; narrow scrutiny of her revealed that much. But she did not change colour, nor was it possible to mistake such slight emotion as she displayed for anything but relief. The hitherto invincible Archie's heart sank low, while she murmured some conventional words and turned away. Must he conclude, then, that he had been in error all along and that the girl, who assuredly did not love the man to whom she was engaged, was equally fancy-free with regard to a far more fas-

cinating person? That was, for several reasons, a difficult thing to believe; yet—what was he to believe?

Somebody close to his elbow observed in an ironical undertone: "There would have been some sense in going away before the mischief was done; but why turn tail now, Mr. Morant? Have you been overtaken by a belated sense of duty, or are you only blind?"

Miss Bradstreet's red-brown eyes met his angrily interrogative ones and expressed an amused disdain when he returned: "The mischief of it is that the mischief is *not* done!"

"How you can imagine that it is not done!" she exclaimed. "Why, it stares everybody in the face, except you and Lord Leonard!" And then, as there was no time for elaborate explanations, she went on hurriedly: "She holds you at arm's length? Naturally she does—who wouldn't in her place? I should have thought you might have had wit enough to outwit her; but, since you haven't, let me give you and her a helping hand. To-morrow afternoon Lord Leonard has to attend a meeting of the County Council. Well, to-morrow afternoon between four and five o'clock it might be worth your while to walk over to the village."

She would have been unable to add more, even if she had wished (as she probably did not) to do so; for the younger members of the Vyse family, who had been skirmishing round her, now dragged her forcibly away, and Archie was left to wonder why this singularly sharp little governess should be so eager to serve him. Not, to be sure, that her motives signified much: women's motives are always hard to get at and seldom repay the trouble that it takes to lay them bare. What, of course, really did signify was the obviously sincere conviction to which she had given utterance. Trustworthy or untrustworthy, correct or incorrect in her surmise, she would at least not have spoken like that unless she had been convinced.

She was in truth so convinced that on the following afternoon she had half a mind to make assurance doubly sure by frankly telling Miss Vyse why she wished for a

companion as far as the village linendraper's; but this was rendered unnecessary by Juliet's immediate acquiescence in a suggestion somewhat unusual. Juliet, who was not very fond of Miss Bradstreet, was nevertheless willing to oblige, when she could, one of whose fondness for her she was compunctiously aware. Moreover, she was out of spirits that day, and she had nothing particular to do. So the two ladies made their way across the park and down shady lanes at the hour previously arranged by one of them, and their talk, as they went, was neither of Lord Leonard nor of Mr. Morant. Miss Bradstreet knew when to be outspoken and when to be reticent—knew also, by sundry trivial signs, that speaking out would for the moment be superfluous, if not dangerous. All she did was to imply, in her demure, tentative, diffident way, that she was sorry for and sympathised with her neighbour, who was half-consciously soothed by these very discreet manifestations. She was indeed, as Archie had called her, a clever little cat.

Archie Morant, strolling punctually along the village street when they emerged upon it, took off his hat and noted that Miss Vyse was surprised—agreeably or otherwise—at meeting him. He said:

“I was on my way to leave P.P.C. cards at your place.”

“There was no need to be so ceremonious,” Juliet tranquilly answered; “but I think you will find my mother at home and I am sure she will be charmed to see you.”

Of course he had no notion of accepting that form of dismissal, nor could he without flagrant discourtesy be shaken off when he faced round and began to advance in the opposite direction beside Miss Bradstreet, who, if she did not actually wink at him, conveyed some swift, equivalent signal to his alert senses. How, he wondered, while he gave himself a countenance by expatiating upon the artistic beauty of thatched roofs and black beams, was his ally going to furnish him with the chance which it was her evident purpose to place at his disposal? She lost no time in letting him know. A loose stone upon which she carelessly, or carefully, set her foot brought her prone to the ground, and a sharp, irrepressible cry an-

nounced the distressing circumstance that she had, in falling, given her ankle a nasty wrench.

Whether it was a case of sprain or not remained to be seen; Mr. Morant, who at once instituted sympathising investigations, and who could not help observing how small and shapely Miss Bradstreet's feet were, felt pretty certain that it was not. But, however that might be, it was clear that the poor young lady could walk no farther without assistance, and only by clutching the arms of her two companions did she contrive to hobble into the neighbouring linendraper's shop, where she was accommodated with chairs and a glass of water.

"I am so sorry and so ashamed of myself!" she penitently murmured. "How lucky it is that I told the children to meet us here with the pony-cart!"

Nothing indeed could have been more lucky, save the fact that the pony-cart, which presently arrived, could by no possibility be made to hold more than one person in addition to its actual freight. The boys and girls whom it contained might, to be sure, be ordered to get out and make room for their elder sister, and they were so ordered; but that solution had doubtless been foreseen and guarded against. They protested in lamentable voices, while their indulgent governess joined them in pleading that they should be allowed to finish the drive which had been promised to them as a half-holiday treat.

"Dear Miss Vyse, if you wouldn't mind walking home! It would be such a disappointment for them, and the General, as you know, so seldom lets them have the pony all to themselves!"

Dear Miss Vyse, being good-natured, was fain to give in, although she began to have vague suspicions concerning dear Miss Bradstreet. Her father, it was quite true, seldom permitted the children to drive out unattended; in point of fact, he never did so. How was it that this permission had now been without rhyme or reason accorded?—and how was it that the young people had been instructed to make their appearance so precisely in the nick of time? But such queries could not very well be put then and there. Moreover, she did not wish to seem

more afraid that she was—nor, for that matter, as afraid as she was—of the young man who stood silently at her elbow, and whose faint smile appeared to intimate that he held a poor opinion of her courage.

"Oh, well!" she said, with a little vexed laugh; and off started the pony-cart, as though in obedience to a preconcerted word of command.

"But I really don't imagine what you are accusing me in your thoughts of imagining," Archie mildly pleaded, some minutes later. "I am quite aware that you didn't come here in order to meet me and that you never instructed Miss Bradstreet to twist her ankle. On the contrary, I have no doubt at all that I am the very last person whom you wished to meet."

Juliet, who had been walking at a needlessly high rate of speed, slackened her pace and surveyed him disdainfully. "I certainly did not wish or expect to meet you, Mr. Morant," she declared; "but I don't know why you should suppose that I have any special objection to meeting you."

He laughed and sighed. "Oh, you know why! You may be right or you may be wrong; for my own part, I believe you are wrong. Because"—

"Oh, please don't say *that* again!" she interrupted.

"But I am going to say it again; I must! After all, the worst punishment that you can inflict upon me is to order me off, and as I am leaving to-morrow in any case, I can afford to take that risk. The question is whether you can afford—do you seriously and honestly think you can?—to take the risk of marrying a man with whom you are not the least little bit in love."

Her contemptuous shrug of the shoulders seemed to imply that this was, at any rate, not a question which she cared to discuss with her present interrogator; but of course silence on her side was scarcely likely to close his lips now.

"You are not an every-day person," he went on; "if you were, you might marry poor Leonard easily enough, I daresay, and console yourself with a coronet and clothes and carriages and so forth. But you needn't tell me that

such things don't tempt you. You will do this fatal thing, if you do it at all, for the simple and absurd reason that you can't endure to be called a jilt."

"Perhaps," she suggested, after a moment of hesitation, "I can't endure to be one. Would you consider that an absurd reason?"

He answered, without the least hesitation, "Yes; in your case, I should. You will do Leonard an injury, not a service, by marrying him; for you won't deceive him long. You make the mistake that all women make if you think you can get a married man to believe himself loved when he isn't. What sometimes happens is that the women actually do—Heaven knows how or why!—become fond of husbands who are not quite to their taste at first; but that will never happen with you."

They were pacing down a deep lane, darkened by overarching boughs. Juliet walked on in silence for some little distance; but at length she could not refrain from giving utterance to the thought that was in her.

"Why not?" she asked. "What difference is there between me and other women?"

"There are a good many differences," he returned; "perhaps the most important of them is that you have a conscience. I won't brag about my own conscience; it's a poor thing of its class and I only obey it when I feel so disposed. Still, like every man—women are otherwise constituted—I have one, and it tells me that marrying a given individual when you love somebody else isn't the straight thing to do."

"You have no right," she exclaimed, "to say that!"

"None whatever; but, as I told you just now, I do say it because I must. I shouldn't say it if you were not what you are; I shouldn't say it only because I am what I am and because I can't help loving you"—

"That wouldn't justify you," she interpolated quickly.

"No; that wouldn't justify me. One thing would, though—and does!"

He laid his hand upon her wrist; against her will, he gently forced her to look him in the face, and her puck-

ered brow, her distressed eyes gave assent, half glad, half ashamed, to his insistence.

"You do love me, Juliet!" he cried in triumph.

Had there been any latent misgiving as to that in his mind—but of course there was none—he was not the man to leave it unallayed. He conquered, as he had conquered before, and as, alas! he was only too likely to conquer again, by sheer determination to get what he wanted and confidence in the means to which he had prompt recourse. In vain did Juliet, enfolded in his arms, protest that she could not and would not disgrace herself by proving false to one "who is worth more than both of us put together." Archie had not a word to say against Leonard's worth; but he pleaded with some plausibility that it is far more disgraceful to cozen and hoodwink a worthy friend than to distress him. "Besides which, as I warned you just now, you are too honest to humbug anybody. It is hard lines on poor Leonard; that I don't deny. But I maintain that throwing our own happiness overboard wouldn't insure his: quite the contrary."

"Our own happiness! But we are not going to be happy—we don't deserve to be! I may screw up just courage enough to break off my engagement; I believe I ought to do so and, horrid and humiliating as it will be, I suppose I shall. But do you really think that I shall ever have the courage to own why I am breaking it off at the eleventh hour?"

"Ah, isn't that just what I said? You can't endure to be called ugly names. And yet—you love me!"

She had some pleas to put forward in defence of an indefensible attitude. "Oh, yes, I love you," she said, "and I have never loved Lord Leonard; I have never loved anybody but you. All the same, we must part. You don't realise that you are asking me to do what would be made impossible for me; you don't realise that my parents, who will be very angry, and very properly angry, as it is, would certainly forbid me to marry you."

"You are of age," he tranquilly remarked. "Still, I see what you mean. The obstacles in the way of simply

substituting poor, poverty-stricken me for the magnificent Leonard would be most unpleasant, if they wouldn't be altogether impossible, to face. Well, we won't face them; we'll turn our backs upon them, instead."

He explained in a few words with what facility this alternative could be adopted. He was so tender, so persuasive, so masterful that her protests weakened and died away, one by one. When all was said, she loved the man, and there is no more unanswerable argument in the world than that. So before Archie Morant, who adhered to his intention of leaving on the morrow, was dismissed with a parting kiss, Miss Vyse had given her assent to a scheme of which she was more than half ashamed, yet which possessed the double advantage of being easily executed and of excluding all effective opposition.

CHAPTER VII

His Own Familiar Friends

MRS. LEONARD, who always kept her eyes open and more often than not kept her lips closed, had had certain suspicions, amounting almost to hopes, in connection with Mr. Morant's very prolonged stay. When, therefore, he took his departure without in any way confirming these, she could not help remarking a little irritably to her son:

"I am not sorry to have seen the last of your self-complacent young friend. He was sent into the world, one must presume, for some purpose or other; but for what purpose I find myself quite unable to conjecture."

"Perhaps," suggested Leonard, with his faint smile, "in order that he might be my friend. I haven't, as you know, the gift of making friends, and Providence may have felt that I was entitled to one."

"That," returned Mrs. Leonard severely, "is a very foolish and irreligious way of speaking. If Providence chose our friends for us, which of course is not the case, such a selection as that of Mr. Morant would assuredly never have been made on your behalf. He might possibly, if he cared to take the trouble, do you some harm; it is inconceivable that he should do you, or anybody else, any good. However, he has gone now, and I trust he will not come back again."

Leonard said no more. His mother, a lady of proved piety, was doubtless better acquainted with the motives and methods of Providence than he. The period of his mother's regency was, moreover, drawing towards its close; so that if, as he hoped, Archie was destined to be welcomed many times in the future to the house which he

had just quitted, welcome would have to be accorded to him by another and a younger hostess. The unfortunate thing was that Juliet also appeared to be more or less prejudiced against his only friend.

He rode over to Old Park, that afternoon, with some intention of saying a word or two in favour of the unappreciated one, and betaking himself at once to the lawn, as his habit was, he came upon Miss Bradstreet, extended upon a long chair all by herself. The lawn-tennis net had not been set up, nor was Juliet in sight; but her voice, mingled with those of the children, was audible at intervals, arising from somewhere in the distance.

"I am afraid you will be defrauded of your game, Lord Leonard," the crippled governess said apologetically. "It seems so tiresome and inconsiderate of me to be *hors de combat* just when I am needed to make up a set; but—one doesn't do these things on purpose, does one?"

Occasionally one does; but Leonard could not and did not surmise that. He said politely that he had been very sorry to hear of Miss Bradstreet's mishap.

"Oh, you did hear of it, then?" she asked, raising a pair of anxious eyes to his.

He did not much like those eyes of hers, nor, as he had once mentioned to Archie, did he very much like the way that she had of bringing them to bear upon him; but now they seemed to express only regret and somewhat un-called-for contrition.

"It was really too provoking!—too ill-timed!" she went on, with a vexed laugh. "And then, as the children were upon the spot with the pony-cart, what could I do? There was nothing for it that I could see except to let them drive me home and leave Miss Vyse and Mr. Morant to follow on foot. I hope you don't think I was wrong."

Leonard stared. "Wrong?" he repeated, looking, as he sometimes did, more formidable than he had any intention of looking. "Why should I think you wrong?"

Miss Bradstreet lowered her eyes in apparent confusion. "Oh, no," she murmured hurriedly; "of course not!—certainly not! I only thought that perhaps—but what

business have I to think things? Don't let me keep you any longer, Lord Leonard. You will find Miss Vyse playing cricket with the children in the long alley. She has very kindly taken them off my hands this afternoon, since I am so helpless."

He said to himself, as he walked away, that he did not know what on earth the woman meant; yet her meaning was really not so obscure that his intelligence could fail to grasp it. His next thought, which was perhaps rather more to the purpose, was that she was confoundedly impertinent. She did not, however, succeed in making him even momentarily jealous, and when he joined his betrothed, who was engaged in bowling lobs to the most diminutive of her brethren, he had already forgotten Miss Bradstreet and her impertinence.

Nothing in Juliet's demeanour reminded him of it. She could not, she said, agree with him in regarding Mr. Morant's desertion of his friends as a calamity, but she did, of course, regret that lawn-tennis was, for that afternoon, impossible. Unfortunately, it was likewise impossible for her to abandon the children and elementary cricket, as she was invited to do. Amused the children must be, and it devolved upon her, for the time being, to amuse them. She was sure Leonard would understand that and excuse her.

He excused her, and he was under the impression that he understood. Not the least of Juliet's many charms in his eyes was her unfailing readiness to sacrifice herself for others. His own unselfishness was such that he cheerfully submitted to the loss of one of those long private colloquies for which his heart was yearning; and indeed it was only after he had been for several consecutive days deprived, upon one pretext or another, of these that he began to grow mildly restive.

"I never seem to get you to myself for a minute now!" he exclaimed, when at last she contrived to obtain what could no longer be denied him. "If I didn't know better, I should think that you were eluding me on purpose."

"And suppose I were doing it on purpose?" she sur-

prised him by rejoining. "Don't you think that might be rather a kindness?"

"A kindness!" he echoed, with raised brows. "In what sense, I wonder."

"Well, you will soon find out—and the sooner the better, surely!—that there are more important occupations and interests in the world for you than philandering. Some men are born to be lovers; but you are a cut above that sort of thing. You are a powerful personage already; you will be a statesman, most likely, one of these days. Before long you will certainly discover your true *raison d'être* and will wonder how you could ever have wasted the time that you have wasted upon a mere woman, who has nothing to recommend her beyond a face which has chanced to take your fancy."

It was after that somewhat far-fetched fashion that she strove to condone her impending treachery. She was most anxious to believe that the man upon whom she was about to inflict a cruel injury would speedily cease to regard himself as injured thereby, and one of the compensations granted to her sex is that they can almost always manage to believe what they are desirous of believing. For the rest, she wished to avoid being left alone with him because, to tell the truth, she could not bear to be kissed by him or to return his kisses. When, as inevitably happened every now and again, she was so left, she hastened to recur to the theme of his inherited functions, his obligatory ambitions, the absurdity of imagining that in such an existence as his love could count for more than a passing incident. Subsequently he recalled these homilies of hers and smiled; at the time they simply puzzled him. He perceived only that she was, for some reason or other, not quite sincere; to have divined the possible cause of her insincerity would have implied a mental disloyalty on his part of which he was wholly incapable. Sometimes he reflected sorrowfully that she could not love him as he loved her; but then he had never had the audacity to hope that she could.

One day Mrs. Vyse announced that her daughter was going up to London for a week. Mrs. Raynham having

most amiably offered to join her there and give her shelter in Chester Square while she held imperative consultations with dressmakers. Consultations with dressmakers were, it stood to reason, imperative, and Leonard only ventured to demur to the length of time specified, which struck him as excessive.

"How am I to get on without you for a whole week?" he ruefully asked, when Juliet accompanied him into the empty entrance hall (she could do no less) to bid him good-bye.

"I hope and believe," she answered, with an odd earnestness, "that you would be able to get on quite well without me for a whole year—or for ever!"

And then quickly interrupting his protests, "Really I am not indispensable," she cried; "really, really I am not!"

Nobody, we are assured, is indispensable; but that statement does not, upon examination, seem to mean very much. The sun, of course, continues to rise and set with its usual monotony and punctuality, happen what may; the world is not brought to an end by the death or suppression of a given individual; yet nothing is more positive than that the course of the world's history is influenced thereby, nor can anything be more obvious than that our own little lives are similarly affected. If Juliet Vyse was not indispensable to Leonard's happiness, his faith in human nature was, and this received something very like a *coup de grâce* on the day when a blotted, agitated, incoherent note from Juliet's mother implored him to repair to Old Park without loss of time. The mis-sive spoke of "dreadful news" and of the writer's astounded affliction, but entered into no particulars. Composed, apparently, under the sway of violent emotion, little could be made of it save that the presence of its recipient was urgently required. A scrawled postscript added, "Please do not say anything to Mrs. Leonard until you have seen us. We must consider what it will be best to do in this terrible emergency, though indeed I fear that there is nothing to be done!"

Cantering across the fields in response to the above dis-

turbing summons, Leonard endeavoured to prepare himself for the announcement which evidently awaited him. That Juliet had decided to break off her engagement he felt pretty sure. She had now been absent for five days out of the allotted seven, and he conjectured that she had found it easier to send a prefatory intimation by post to her mother than to suddenly explode such a shell amongst them all on her return. Deeply distressed though he was, he did not despair. He knew that from the very outset she had had intermittent misgivings; he divined that these had of late pressed upon her with greater frequency and force, as the near approach of her wedding-day might naturally enough cause them to do; he was humbly conscious of his own inferiority to her and willing to make every allowance for scruples which were perhaps a little exaggerated. There would be need, he thought, for patience; possibly even, should she insist upon it, for a postponement of the marriage; but that he was destined to lose her irrecoverably he could not—remembering many fond words of hers—believe. He would very likely have to take her part against her incensed parents, if not against herself, and he was fully prepared to do both.

Thus inadequately equipped, he entered the library at Old Park, where Mrs. Vyse, dissolved in tears, and the General, red as a turkey-cock, were waiting for him, and thus he encountered, straight between the eyes as it were, a blow from which it may be said that he never entirely recovered.

But at the time—perhaps because he was stunned, perhaps because he had a large reserve fund of courage—he took it with the utmost outward composure, his usual pallor only becoming somewhat increased. He heard without flinching how Juliet had written to tell her mother that she had been clandestinely married in London to Archie Morant and that, since she could not hope to be forgiven, she must content herself with stating that bare, disgraceful fact. Mrs. Raynham, it seemed, had been in no way privy to a proceeding which had filled her with consternation; all the necessary legal formalities and ar-

rangements had been undertaken by the bridegroom, and Juliet, on the eve of her departure for the Continent, wished it to be known that she accepted her full share of responsibility for what her husband had done.

"A more heartless, impudent letter I never read in all my life!" the irate General declared. "Here it is; you can see it, if you like. I haven't a word to say for my daughter—not a word! She is quite right in calling her offence unpardonable, and she will certainly not cross this threshold again while I live. But this I will say, Leonard: bad as she is, that lying, insinuating rascal of a friend of yours is a deuced sight worse!"

The poor old gentleman's anger and mortification may have been somewhat enhanced by the calmness of his forfeited son-in-law, who silently took the proffered document, and whom he showed some disposition, then and thereafter, to hold accountable for the iniquities of a false friend; but Leonard paid little heed to him.

Juliet's letter, as her discarded lover read it—and he took long enough about reading it to read between the lines—was neither heartless nor impudent; although, for the reason that she had given, it contained no expressions of remorse or regret. Her brief reference to himself was even touching, so far as it went. "Tell him that I would have written to him if I had not felt that it would be a mockery to do that. He has been very good to me and I shall always be very fond of him; but I did not love him and I do love Archie. I can say no more."

"I don't know that she could say more," was Leonard's dry comment, as he handed the sheet back to General Vyse; "I don't know that there is anything for us to confer about. What is done is done, and whether we like it or not, we must accept it."

The General stormed and used powerful language, while Mrs. Vyse, weeping aloud, called Heaven to witness that she had not deserved the humiliation which had befallen her. Neither of them, however, could suggest any alternative to chagrined resignation, although they both felt somewhat aggrieved by the impassability of one who had even more excuse than they had for tearing

his hair out. He left them under the impression that he cared discreditably little and that, badly as he had been treated, he had perhaps brought his misfortune upon himself. What girl, when assailed by the importunities of a lover with blood in his veins, would be likely to be kept up to a sense of her duty by such an iceberg?

But poor Leonard, who was no iceberg, cared to so tragic an extent that words could have afforded him little relief. It was not, he said to himself, as he rode forlornly away, on account of the ruin of his life or the shattering of his hopes that he was broken-hearted; it was because the two persons for whose loyalty he would have answered as for his own were avowedly not what they had pretended to be. Since they were false, who could be trusted? That he might possibly have imputed to them qualities to which they had laid no overt claim was an aspect of the case which did not present itself to him in judging them. He saw only that they had deliberately deceived him, and his appreciation of the entire human race became permanently warped by that fact. Facts were to him ever the most stubborn of things, not to be explained away or perverted either for his own comfort or for the exculpation of those who were dearer to him than his own comfort. People often say things which they do not mean, and it is easy, upon that understanding, to forgive and forget cruel speeches; but their actions reveal them inexorably, unmistakably. Such, at any rate, was his view, and although no student of humanity is likely to arrive at the truth by binding himself to such a view, there is much to be said in favour of it as a sound working rule. Juliet might have told him frankly how matters stood; Archie might have told him; he would not have been hard upon them, had they done so. But they, his own familiar friends, had found it less awkward, less troublesome to make a fool of him, and his feeling was that he would never be able to believe in man or woman again.

An irrepressible gleam of satisfaction was to be seen in his mother's eyes when he curtly, unemotionally imparted to her the intelligence which could not be with-

held from her; but she consoled with him so far as her sense of what was due to him as a man and as the head of so distinguished a family would allow her to do.

"I am sorry for you, Leonard," said she; "I have no doubt that you feel this, although you do not look as if you felt it very much, and it must of course be a great shock to you. Nevertheless, what you may now consider a misfortune will turn out, I believe, to have been a blessing in disguise. For my own part, I never liked that girl. Her behaviour in London, before you became engaged to her, did not seem to me straightforward, and I have since noticed things to which it would have been useless to call your attention. As for that young Morant, his conduct speaks for itself and will probably involve its own punishment ere long; for I understand that his means are limited and I suspect him of expensive tastes. I cannot but think that you are well rid of such a pair, and I quite hope that, after a time, you will marry happily in your own class."

"I shall never marry," the young man briefly declared.

"My dear boy," answered Mrs. Leonard, with a tolerant, wintry smile, "it is perhaps natural and excusable in you to say that; but there are people who are just as much compelled by force of circumstances to marry as if they were Emperors or Kings. There is at present no heir presumptive to your title nor any heir of entail to your estates: it is therefore out of the question for you to live and die a bachelor."

"I can't see why it is out of the question," said the sole surviving representative of the Leonards.

"That," returned his mother, "is because you are temporarily blind to an imperative duty. But I do not wish to hurry you; all will come right in the end."

CHAPTER VIII.

Miss Bradstreet's Visions

THE past career of Miss Lily Bradstreet was involved in an obscurity which, from her point of view, was wise and advisable. It had been somewhat eventful, as indeed the history of a young woman who had lost both her parents at an early age and had inherited next to nothing from them, save an unruly imagination and sundry physical advantages, was not unlikely to be; but she had—Heaven knows how—obtained an engagement at nursery governess in the family of an aristocratic lady, who had passed her on to Mrs. Vyse with the best of characters, and Mrs. Vyse would have been willing at any moment to testify that her conduct during her residence at Old Park had been exemplary. Mrs. Vyse, to be sure, did not know much about her: what need is there to know much about a governess who is nice with the children, gets on pretty well with the servants and does not come bothering with complaints about fancied slights or grievances?

But if Miss Bradstreet made no complaints, that was not because she relished slights or because she was unconscious of grievances. On the contrary, there were moments when she was ready to stick a knife into the men and women—particularly the men—who insultingly ignored her, and many a time, after she had retired to rest, her pillow was moistened with tears of rage and self-pity. For she was a vain, passionate, ambitious young person, and well she knew that, if she was not strictly beautiful, she possessed a special order of charms which no man living should have been able to ignore. It was no doubt owing to Archie Morant's inexplicable disregard of these that she conceived for him a sentiment

which, by reason of the poverty of language, can only be described as love. This sentiment, evidenced without the least success in the course of their innumerable partnerships at lawn-tennis, was not incompatible with something like hatred; still of course she did not hate him nearly as much as she hated Juliet Vyse. To bring about the latter's lasting discomfiture was a species of vengeance which must be regarded as cheaply purchased even at such a price as making her a present of the beloved one, and although Miss Bradstreet can hardly be said to have brought about a catastrophe which was in any case bound to occur, she was, as we have seen, instrumental in paving the way for it. Therefore, while the General fumed and Mrs. Vyse sobbed, the governess surreptitiously rubbed her hands.

It is difficult to account for the amazing projects which insinuate themselves into the brains of women who are at once discontented, conceited, aware of certain powers and limited in intelligence: all that can be affirmed is that such women are prone to harbour such projects, and that every now and again they actually contrive to carry them out. So extravagant a notion as that of completing her triumph by subjugating Lord Leonard—the cold, proud, unsusceptible Lord Leonard, of all people!—would scarcely have occurred as practicable to a clever woman; but it did occur to Miss Lily Bradstreet, and she gloated over the thought of it in secret, aided thereto by her riotous imagination. Not, it is true, in the light of an immediate possibility; she knew that no measures could as yet be attempted towards the accomplishment of her end. But she also knew that stricken hearts cry aloud for anodynes and that those who can supply anodynes at the right moment may, by skilful management, secure the most surprising rewards. Her experience inclined her to fix the right moment at a period of from two to three months subsequent to the infliction of the wound; so that she was very well pleased to learn, through fragments of conversation at the luncheon-table, that Lord Leonard had departed on a yachting cruise which was expected to last about that length of time.

The sea, which during so many years of inland life had never ceased to call Leonard at intervals, summoned him in this dark hour with an importunity which would brook no denial, and even his mother could scarcely have kept him at home, had she desired to do so. But she had no such unwise desire, and applauded his proclaimed intention of hiring some sort of a sea-going craft forthwith, late though it was in the season for entering upon negotiations of that nature.

"You will take somebody with you, of course," said she. "It will be easy enough to pick up a couple of companions, and if I were you, I should charter a steam-yacht. Then you might make straight for the Mediterranean, where I daresay you will be able to get a little shooting, which will give you something to do."

He received the well-meant advice silently, being in no wise minded to follow it. He did not want steam, he did not want shooting, least of all did he want companions. An eighty-ton yawl which he had the luck to secure, fitted out and provided with skipper and crew, from a gentleman who was tired of sailing around and round the Isle of Wight answered his purpose admirably, and in her he headed, without defined programme, for the open Atlantic, where a blustering gale of late summer roughly welcomed him. Sailors as a rule do not care about dirty weather which indeed entails a good deal of discomfort and ceases to be exhilarating as soon as you have become used to it; but Leonard, who was born to be a sailor and who had little chance of ever seeing too much of the ocean in its angry moods, enjoyed the frequent storms which he encountered during his autumn cruise up the west coast of Ireland and Scotland. Only in harbour did he grow weary, listless, despairing; his spirits rose when he was battling with winds and waves under a leaden sky, out of sight of the hated land, where human beings jostled one another like bees in a hive, where dull daily duties had to be discharged, where sycophants grovelled and treachery prospered and neither love nor friendship could be counted upon as sincere.

But a return to dull daily duties was of course inevi-

table, and even the most enthusiastic of yachtsmen must admit, when the short, chill days of November come, that it is time to take leave of our northern waters. Not until that month did Lord Leonard reluctantly abandon the stout little vessel which he subsequently purchased of her owner, and it cannot be said that he brought a very cheerful countenance home with him.

"You look better in health," was his mother's comment upon his appearance, after she had subjected him to a brief, grave scrutiny.

"I am better in every way," he declared.

"I am glad to hear you say so; although I cannot think it good for any man of your age to lead the solitary life that you have done lately. Had I been you I should have remained away longer and seen more people; but it is perhaps best in some respects that you should resume your place here. I think I mentioned to you in my last letter that the house will be full next week."

She evidently meant him to understand that, since he had seen fit to come home, he must now be considered as, so to speak, out of mourning, and he tacitly acquiesced. The last thing that he desired was to parade his woe, and she was very welcome to fill the house with people, so long as she did not expect him to offer marriage to any of them. That this was probably just what she did expect he divined; but there was no need to meet contentious questions half-way. One passing allusion, and only one, was made to Archie Morant and his bride, who, it appeared, were still abroad. The Vyses had been away, but were now at Old Park once more, and Mrs. Leonard had seen them.

"I am glad to tell you," said she, "that they take up a sensible attitude. They are not apologetic and they don't speak of their disappointment. If, as I am assured is the case, they have broken finally with their daughter, that is their affair, not ours. You will be able, I think, to meet them without embarrassment on either side."

That might be so; but there was some embarrassment on both sides when he suddenly found himself face to face with Miss Bradstreet and her youthful charges the

next afternoon. It was in a by-road adjoining the entrance to his own park that this encounter took place, and although he did not at all want to stop and shake hands, the clamorous greeting of the children left him no alternative. They behaved as badly as possible, those children—the result, doubtless, of ill-advised admonitions to bear themselves discreetly. They asked him if he had heard that Juliet had married Mr. Morant and had gone away for good; they wanted to know where he himself had been and whether he didn't think it most awful rot to have a wedding in the family without presents or wedding-cake. Poor Miss Bradstreet, striving in vain to reduce them to silence, was overwhelmed with confusion and contrition.

"I am so dreadfully sorry!" she murmured. And then, very diffidently and hesitatingly, "I have been so dreadfully sorry about—about everything!"

But Leonard, looking over her head, missed all the unspeakable things that her eyes had to say to him, while in the distant politeness with which he wished her good evening and ignored her sympathy, he was even more snubbing than he intended to be. So that little interview was not, from Miss Bradstreet's point of view, much of a success.

However, after several ingeniously planned attempts which came to nothing, she contrived a second interview with him some ten days later. This time she was alone, and he, striding homewards through the dusk from the gamekeeper's cottage, which she had seen him enter shortly before, would have passed on with a bow, had she not timidly arrested him. The occasion was one which demanded timid audacity; for indeed what had befallen her was a stroke of rare good luck, and she knew well that she might have to wait long for a recurrence of the same.

"Lord Leonard," she stammered, "I can't bear to let you go without telling you how often I have reproached myself for contributing—as I feel I did—to promote your—your misfortune! I am afraid there can be no doubt that everything was arranged on that unlucky day

when I sprained my ankle and left two people together whom I ought never to have left."

"I really do not think that you have the slightest reason to reproach yourself, Miss Bradstreet," he answered, in accents of cold annoyance. "I imagine that the arrangements of which you speak would have been made whether you had sprained your ankle or not, and it could hardly have been in your power or in anybody else's to avert what you call my misfortune."

"Oh, don't *you* call it a misfortune?" she eagerly exclaimed; "how glad I should be if you didn't!" Then, sighing and dropping her voice, "Ah, but I am afraid you do—I am afraid you must! And perhaps, as you say, it was in nobody's power to avert it. I did what I could; I wanted you to have what you wanted to have, although I knew— But you will only think me impertinent if I go on, and, after all, so long as you don't blame me, that is the utmost I can ask."

"It never for one moment occurred to me to blame you," Leonard assured her.

He certainly did think her impertinent for saying as much as she had done, and her uninvited, underbred sympathy jarred upon him. She was not very skilful; yet she might have been the cleverest woman in England and have succeeded no better. What she had got, and what she meant to retain for a few minutes at least, was his enforced attention; it should not be her fault, she resolved, if he quitted her without a suspicion that she humbly adored him. Undeterred, therefore, by his forbidding mein, she proceeded to relate, in a breathless, incoherent fashion, how noticeable and significant to her had been incidents to which his chivalrous loyalty had blinded him, how she had longed to whisper a word of warning in his ear, but had shrunk from taking such a liberty, how she had hesitated between her desire for his happiness and her fears that Juliet would never make him happy. "I could not help being almost glad," she finally avowed, "when I heard what had happened. It seemed to me that if you had suffered a great loss, you had perhaps been preserved from an even worse danger."

Vulgar and tactless though she was, his heart became in a measure softened towards her. She meant kindly, no doubt, and there were so few people in the world (was there, indeed, a single person, save this rather absurd little governess?) who cared two straws about him or bestowed a second thought upon his forlorn isolation. And then she played her trump card, not in the least knowing that it was a trump.

"Lord Leonard," she resumed timorously, "now that I have summoned up courage to speak to you at all, I feel as if I must be bolder still and say how beautiful I thought those lines of yours in this month's number of the *Victorian Era*. Dreadfully sad and bitter; but—oh, how exquisite!"

It is one of those unaccountable phenomena which are of every-day occurrence that Lord Leonard, who had an educated critical faculty, a sense of humour exceeding the average, plenty of intelligence and absolutely no personal vanity, always believed himself to be a poet. A poet he never was; but all his life long he continued to turn out fairly respectable verses and publish them at his own expense. The stanzas to which Miss Bradstreet referred were the first from his pen to appear in print. Written on board the yacht, they had been accepted by the editor of the periodical above-mentioned, who it may be, was not averse to numbering titled persons amongst his contributors, and to hear them described as exquisite gave their author, it must be owned, a thrill of gratification. He thawed perceptibly, and his companion was sharp enough to perceive that her chance shot had hit the target.

After that she wisely left in her armoury other weapons which were not, for the time being, required and gave a free rein to the enthusiasm with which, as she averred, Lord Leonard's poetic genius had inspired her. She knew little and cared less about her theme; but flattery, as all the world is aware, can afford to dispense with subtlety, and it is at all events more agreeable to be lauded for qualities with which one may or may not be endowed than to have one's tenderest and most private feelings trampled upon. Leonard did not wish to talk about

Juliet, but he was less unwilling—since it seemed that converse with Miss Bradstreet he must—to reply to questions respecting his literary aptitude.

"Oh, yes, I have been scribbling more or less ever since I first went up to Oxford," he confessed—a confession which, oddly enough, he had never made to Juliet—"I have a whole drawer full of compositions which didn't satisfy me and which will, consequently, never have the chance of dissatisfying anybody else. I fancied, rightly or wrongly, that the trifle which you are so good as to praise had a certain merit; so I sent it to the *Victorian Era*. The others are worth less. Indeed, I take it that I might safely describe them in one word, instead of two, and call them worthless."

"Of course," returned Miss Bradstreet, with deep feeling, "I could not presume to judge of their worth; but I know that I would give a great deal to see them."

Needless to say, she obtained that privilege gratuitously. A bulky packet, addressed to her, was left at Old Park on the following day, and a grateful note expressed her sense of the high honour conferred upon her. But she had the wisdom and the patience to let a fortnight elapse before writing again to Lord Leonard or returning him his manuscripts, and during that fortnight the memory of her and of them naturally recurred to him more than once. Her opinion might not be very valuable; yet he could not help wondering sometimes what her opinion was, nor could he forget that she had at least read and admired what had apparently attracted nobody else's attention. Amongst his guests were several young ladies who were only too evidently eager to ingratiate themselves with him; but perhaps they did not see the *Victorian Era*. At any rate, they said nothing about the current issue of that magazine, while they had more to say respecting other topics than he cared to hear. He was at no time a ladies' man and he was ever a fastidious one; their tactics and those of their mothers struck him as lacking delicacy.

Possibly Miss Bradstreet's tactics were open to the

same imputation, for the truth is that she was a somewhat heavy-handed artist; but it was in her favour that he did not suspect her of employing any system of tactics and ascribed to mere accident his overtaking her, one evening, while she was trudging across the park towards Leonard's End with a parcel under her arm. She started violently (he was as yet neither old enough nor experienced enough to criticise the exaggeration of her start), on being accosted; but she was not, it seemed, so taken aback as to be deprived of a fine flow of eloquence. Not being an absolute fool, he could not accept literally her fantastic eulogies upon the poems which she had been on her way to restore to their gifted author; but he was relatively fool enough to believe in her sincerity, and this, for all its extravagance, did not displease him.

"You think me ridiculously enthusiastic," she said, after a dialogue which had lasted some ten minutes. "Well, perhaps I am, and perhaps it does not much matter whether you are ever acknowledged as a great poet or not, since you are certain in any case to become a great man. Still, I am glad that you are a poet, because"—

Here she came to so long a pause that he was obliged to ask her why she was glad.

"Because," she answered, with becoming hesitation, "I think that writing poetry will always be a relief and a solace to you; because I hope that you may get a little happiness in that way, if in no other. And—I do so *want* you to be happy!"

She did that little bit of rehearsed acting very fairly well, and conveyed the impression which she had intended to convey; but Lord Leonard's rejoinder did not sound particularly encouraging.

"Oh, thank you," said he hurriedly drawing himself up and speaking with marked chilliness; "you are very kind. I daresay I shall have quite as much happiness as other people and more than I deserve. Good evening."

Miss Bradstreet, thus unequivocally snubbed, bowed in meek silence and humility and retired. Nevertheless, as

soon as she had satisfied herself that Lord Leonard was out of sight, she indulged in a chuckle and an unseemly caper. For it was as certain as anything could be that he would soon realise how very rude he had been and would feel bound to apologise.

CHAPTER IX

Ice and Fire

MISS BRADSTREET was only half correct in her forecast. Leonard did indeed recognise, upon reflection, that he had been rather brutal and was proportionately contrite; but he neither wrote an apology nor delivered one by word of mouth. Not being conceited enough to flatter himself that the governess had fallen a victim to his personal fascinations, he was forced to the unwelcome, yet thoroughly sound, conclusion that she was making a brazen bid for his rank and wealth, and under such circumstances his strength evidently was to sit still. Assailed, as he was at that time, by other and less inadmissible female candidates for honours which he did not propose to bestow upon any of them, he had cultivated an attitude of self-defence which consisted in planting his feet firmly upon the ground and mutely laying his ears back. This strategy was met by them in a style which did not tend to raise his opinion of women at large; but at least they were unable to make any headway against it. He was sorry that Miss Bradstreet should be no better than the rest of her sex, for her appreciation of his literary efforts had given him some passing pleasure; but it did not, after all, signify very much what Miss Bradstreet was or was not.

The next occasion on which he saw a lady who had somewhat underrated his intelligence was when, as in duty bound, and in deference to maternal promptings, he called at Old Park to pay his respects to Mrs. Vyse. He found her in the library, engaged in pouring out tea for her employer, and she looked as if she had never gone into ecstasies over a poem or made eyes at a poet in her life. Her

eyes, indeed, remained demurely cast down when he greeted her; she returned no audible response to his greeting, and almost immediately slipped out of the room.

"Such a good girl!" murmured Mrs. Vyse, as soon as the door had closed behind her, "so thoughtful and gentle and considerate! I can't tell you what a comfort she has been to me in her quiet way during all the trying days that have come upon me this year."

"She always struck me as an amiable, obliging sort of person," observed Leonard, who, without being eager to discuss Miss Bradstreet, preferred doing that to entering upon the more delicate subject of Mrs. Vyse's trials.

"Yes, and genuinely sympathising, too, in little, unobtrusive ways. I am not, as you know, equal to much exertion, and of late so many duties have devolved upon me which I had been accustomed to—to have taken off my hands that I really can't think how I should have got on without her. Of course she is not quite"—

"I suppose not," Leonard assented; "though, if it comes to that, I don't know why she shouldn't be."

"Oh, some of them are, no doubt; some of them are daughters of the clergy and so forth. But, as a general thing, one doesn't expect refinement and doesn't get it. I don't call Lily Bradstreet refined; all I claim for her is that she is a good, simple little creature and that her heart is in the right place."

Leonard made no rejoinder, and presently Mrs. Vyse resumed, "I only hope she hasn't lost it to Mr. Mossop, the curate, who is always making excuses to come here and who, I am sure, can't afford to marry; but I am rather uneasy about her, poor girl! She hasn't seemed to me to be in good spirits latterly, and I am afraid she may have something on her mind."

"Don't be alarmed; she won't marry the curate," said Leonard, with a short, abrupt laugh.

But on being requested to explain himself, all he had to reply was that she did not look to him as though she would. Inwardly he was a little perturbed and alive to the possibility—it was scarcely more than a possibility—of Miss Bradstreet's having lost her heart to somebody

else. If, for her misfortune, she had done that, he had wronged her, and he hated to be guilty of injustice towards anybody. There was, however, nothing to be done in the way of making amends, and to give her a wide berth remained, anyhow, his wisest course. He brought his visit to a close as soon as he could; though he was not allowed to do so until Mrs. Vyse had made him the confident of some natural, but embarrassing lamentations.

"I can't venture to hope that you have forgiven poor Juliet. Her father, I fear, never will, and it certainly does seem out of the question for us to receive her and her husband here at present. Still, you will perhaps understand what a loss she is to me and how anxious I feel about her future. Lily Bradstreet tries to comfort me by declaring that you are fortunate in having been preserved from a wife who would never really have cared for you—which may be true—and that you are sure to marry soon—which is also true, I daresay. But her idea is that I must not hope to see my daughter again while you remain unmarried."

Leonard did not say that in that case Mrs. Vyse might wait a long time before seeing her daughter again; but he did say that he harboured no resentment against the latter. What he could not honestly affirm was that he wished ever to renew friendly intercourse either with her or with Archie Morant.

There was another thing for which he was very certain that he did not wish, and that was a renewal of friendly relations with Miss Bradstreet, whom he vaguely distrusted, notwithstanding the favourable report that he had heard of her. Yet during many subsequent days thoughts of her kept recurring, uninvited, to his mind. The chances were that she was, as Mrs. Vyse had called her, a good girl; the chances were that she genuinely commiserated him and genuinely admired his poetry; the chances were assuredly against her having fallen in love with an ill-favoured, unlovable being, and even more against her having conceived ambitious, preposterous designs. He regretted that he had been uncivil to her, and resolved to be

civil if only formally so, should their paths happen to cross once more.

Their paths were just as sure to end by crossing once more as a cunning, aspiring, unscrupulous young woman was to follow up the scent of her elusive quarry. Miss Bradstreet had the wit and the self-control to await her opportunity, which came to her when a spell of hard weather put a stop to fox-hunting and froze the great lake at Leonard's End. That she happened to be a skilful and graceful skater was a piece of good fortune which she naturally took care to turn to account, and as there was no sheet of water within a twenty miles' radius which could compare with that to which she and the children were given leave to betake themselves, her performances upon the ice were witnessed and admired by the whole county, including Lord Leonard. He took occasion to pay her some compliments, which had the apparent effect of making her disagreeably aware that she had rendered herself conspicuous. She stared at him, murmured an indistinct, timid reply, and immediately skated off towards a less frequented part of the mere, hoping to goodness that he would be sufficiently piqued to follow her. And although he was not exactly piqued, he did follow her. She never turned her head until he caught her up, nor did he succeed in catching her up until she saw fit to slacken speed, being by that time a good quarter of a mile away from the throng of skaters and bystanders, whom a jutting, pine-grown peninsula effectually shut out from view.

"I humbly confess that you have the pace of me, Miss Bradstreet," said he, laughing, when she came to an abrupt standstill and faced him with an air of half-defiant interrogation; "but I persevered in the chase, knowing that I was bound to overtake you as soon as you reached the top of the lake."

"Why should you have wanted to overtake me, Lord Leonard?" she asked, in slightly troubled accents.

"Only because I wanted to beg your pardon," he answered, conscious that he was not behaving quite as he had intended to behave, yet unable to exhibit himself as at one and the same time propitiatory and formal. "I

know I was surly that afternoon when you were so kind as to say flattering things about my attempts at verse-making; I am afraid it is my nature to be surly. Will you excuse me on the plea that I can't help being what I am, and that my general churlishness is addressed to nobody in particular?"

As if any woman living would have been likely to excuse him upon a plea so unsatisfactory! Miss Bradstreet smiled sadly and a trifle bitterly as she answered: "There is no need for you to beg my pardon, Lord Leonard; I quite understood, thank you."

With that she swept swiftly away from him and made as though she would retrace her course; but he could do no less than intercept her.

"I hope you believe me," said he; "I hope you don't think that I was deliberately impolite."

"I *know* you were!" she cried, pausing once more and bringing a pair of dilated eyes to bear upon him, after the fashion of a hunted animal at bay. "Why should you deny it? Have I complained? I don't complain; I acknowledge that you were right. I forgot myself; I took the liberty of talking to you as if we were equals, whereas I ought to have remembered that you are a peer of the realm, while I am nothing but a governess. I needed a lesson, and you gave me one. All I can say is that you will never have to give me another."

Thereupon she sped away like a bird on the wing, leaving Leonard to his own reflections, which were necessarily of a self-accusing order.

"Does she really take me for a snob?" he penitently wondered. "I daresay she does; I daresay she is a little bit of a snob herself, poor girl! But I can't allow her to remain under that impression; I must see her again and make friends with her, though I am not sure that I want to be intimate with her."

He wound up with an involuntary, irrelevant homage to the grace of her figure and her movements. "Why wasn't Morant attracted by her? She is just the sort of woman to attract him."

Neither on the morrow nor on the succeeding day did

Miss Bradstreet appear amongst the skaters, and it was with something akin to disappointment that Leonard noted her absence. That she should have determined to disappoint him, at the risk of a thaw setting in, proved her to be what in some respects, no doubt, she was, a bold strategist, and Fortune, which proverbially favours the audacious, did not cheat her of her reward. For on the third afternoon the frost still held, and although she was at some ostentatious pains to avoid Lord Leonard when he approached her and the Vyse children, he ended by cornering her at the precise spot where she wished to be cornered and where their previous colloquy had taken place.

"Oh, please don't say or think any more about it!" she interrupted, in visible agitation, after he had been striving for several minutes to convince her that she had done him an injustice. "If I was hurt, I was very silly to be hurt, and I quite believe that you did not mean to hurt me. It was reading your poetry that made me forget—that made me wish— But I can't explain!"

She bit the corner of her mouth until her eyes filled with tears—a telling little artifice which she had employed many a time before with satisfactory results. "Lord Leonard," said she, "I am sure you want to be kind. Will you do me a small favour?"

"With the greatest pleasure," he answered, "if I can."

"Oh, you can! It is only to take no notice at all of me for the future. We shall not often meet, I hope, and when we do, it will be the easiest thing in the world for you to ignore me. Nobody is expected to shake hands with the governess."

Leonard scrutinised her with quickened interest. "Why are you so vindictive?" he asked.

Her eyes, encountering his for one flashing instant from between moist lashes, pathetically answered the question; her lips hurriedly replied:

"I am not vindictive; I can't bear you to think that of me! I shall always remember that you were kind to me once and that you let me see your poems, and—and I shall always pray for your happiness, as I have done all along."

But I don't want you to be either kind or unkind to me ever again, please. I must go now."

In her haste to escape she wheeled round too suddenly; her skate slipped and she would have fallen if he had not caught her in his arms. That she incontinently burst out crying was perhaps due, as he understood her to aver between her sobs that it was, to the pain caused by her having once more wrenched her weak ankle; but, however that may have been, the least he could do was to half support, half carry her to the frozen bank, and even after he had deposited her upon it she continued to cling to him, weeping hysterically.

The least impressionable of men might have been pardoned for losing his self-command in such a situation, and Leonard was somewhat more impressionable than he was supposed to be by those who knew him best. The woman whose head rested upon his shoulder, and whose frame was shaken by gusts of emotion which she evidently could not control, was, after all, a very pretty woman and, like everybody else, he had senses which were liable to occasion disturbance. Moreover, she had just as good as told him that she loved him; she was perhaps the only person in the world who did; how could he help being both sorry for her and grateful to her? It was doubtless unlucky for him that sorrow and gratitude should have found expression through the time-honoured and simple medium of a kiss; but then his luck, poor fellow, was ever of the worst.

Miss Bradstreet's good luck, on the contrary, was equalled only by her prompt and adroit manipulation of it. Without giving Leonard time to realise that he had been guilty of a most imprudent act, she ecstatically returned his kiss, and then gasped out, "Oh, but I must not!—we must not!—it would be impossible!"

What would be impossible? Of what was she insanely dreaming? To a resolute woman there are but few downright impossibilities, and although he was not at that moment disposed to think of her as resolute, her ejaculation had so chilling and sobering an effect upon him that he would have requested her to be more explicit, had she not

suddenly wrested herself free, whispering as she did so: "Pretend to be helping me to take my skates off; somebody is coming!"

Somebody was stepping gingerly across the ice; but it was only a footman, despatched by Mrs. Leonard to state that she was about to drive back to the house, and was his lordship ready? His lordship at first replied that he was not ready; but, on receiving a muttered admonition from the lady at whose feet he knelt, modified this into: "You can say that I shall be with Mrs. Leonard in a few minutes."

"This means," said Miss Bradstreet, as soon as the man had withdrawn, "that your disappearance and mine has already been remarked upon, and it will never do for us to give a handle to scandalmongers. I would much rather that you left me now, please."

His own perturbed feeling was that he would very much rather leave her than stay with her; but how was she to limp back unassisted? Upon this point she reassured him, declaring, with perfect truth, that she was not really disabled.

"It was nothing but a twist, which found out the weak spot for a moment; I shall be all right without my skates." She added, after a brief pause, "I can't trust myself to speak now; but if you wish to say anything more to me—and something more will have to be said, will it not?—I shall be in the wood just outside our lodge to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock. Mrs. Vyse is going to take the children to a juvenile party at which my attendance is not required, as there will be no room for me in the carriage."

He had no choice but to accept that assignation and his immediate dismissal, although he did not much fancy the former. What he liked still less was the good-humoured chaff of the young men and maidens who accompanied him and his mother homewards in the waggonette. This was the second time, they observed, that he had been seen to pursue Mrs. Vyse's pretty governess out of sight, and they wanted to know what it meant. With all his heart he wished that he could tell them; with all his heart, too,

he wished that he himself knew. He thought, however, that he knew what it could never mean and what Miss Bradstreet, surely, must realise that it never could mean. Only it was a thousand pities that he had been such a lunatic as to kiss her!

CHAPTER X

Two by Tricks

IF there was a question which perplexed Leonard more than that of what he was going to say to Miss Bradstreet, as he strode towards the appointed trysting-place through the gloom of a bleak, grey afternoon, it was that of what on earth she was going to say to him. Nothing that it could be very agreeable to him to hear: that much seemed certain. Yet, conscious though he was of having got himself into a horrid mess, and eager though he was to find some honourable way of escape from it, he found a species of exhilaration in the thought that one woman in the world loved him. Not, indeed, an eligible woman, not a woman of his own class, not even, to his sense, a beautiful woman; still one who really and truly loved him, and who would have loved him—so, at least, he believed—had he been poor and obscure. It was strange that, despite his natural humility, despite the crudity of Miss Bradstreet's manoeuvres and in the face of all probability, he should have believed anything of the sort; but such was his belief.

So when she hurried to meet him in the privacy of a leafless copse and when, without a word, she flung herself into his arms, he was fain to repeat his indiscretion of the previous day. He had perhaps no choice between the folly of repeating it and the brutality of repelling her; nevertheless, he gravely compromised his chances of effecting an orderly retreat by thus permitting her to score an initial success. He was, moreover, quite taken aback by her method of following it up; for although he had prepared himself for several possible lines of action on her part, he had never expected her to assume the character of an injured, yet forgiving, victim.

"You must not reproach yourself," she murmured; "you may be sure that I do not reproach you. I know you care for me; I know you feel—as I felt long before you did—that we were created for one another; I understand your having forced me—oh, so much against my will!—to do what I had vowed that nothing should tempt me to do. Don't pity me; I am glad, as well as wretched. And indeed, my dearest love," she went on, gently caressing him, "you are almost as much to be pitied as I am. Yes, pitied, not blamed, nor accused of wanting courage."

Leonard could not help saying that he was not aware of being a coward.

"Nobody," she declared, "would dare to call you a coward. But there are different kinds of courage, and you would have a kind which I suppose not one man in a hundred could boast of if you were to defy your mother and your family and your whole world by insisting upon marrying Mrs. Vyse's governess. You will not insist—no, don't interrupt me!—I am quite certain that you will not; and what is more, I would not consent to marry you if you did. Although I am nobody, I have the sort of pride which even mere nobodies must be allowed to have; besides which, I love you far too much to let you spoil your life for me."

Was ever honest gentleman placed in a more painful dilemma? So honest was Leonard that he had half a mind to blurt out the truth and take all the humiliating consequences. If he refrained from adopting that heroic plan, it was assuredly not in order to spare himself, but because, whatever varieties of courage he may have possessed, he had not that of being mercifully cruel.

"You are mistaken in me," said he, quietly withdrawing himself from Miss Bradstreet's clinging embrace. "You probably think that I am under my mother's thumb; most people, I believe, think so, and to a certain extent they are right. I would sacrifice a good deal to avoid distressing my mother, and I may as well confess that I would also sacrifice something rather than offend the prejudices of the little world in which I live. But I certainly would not

sacrifice the happiness of any woman whom I loved either to please my mother or in deference to conventional ideas. The one and only essential thing, it seems to me, is that there should be real love on both sides. I think you will agree with me there, and that you will see how indispensable it is for us to make sure that we know what we are about."

Miss Bradstreet, whose notions as to what she was about left nothing to be desired in respect of lucidity, sighed heavily. "It is not your love that I doubt," she answered; "I should be ashamed of myself if I could think that you had kissed me yesterday without loving me. But I do doubt whether you would have done it if I had not so unpardonably betrayed my love for you; I do doubt whether a misalliance could ever make you happy."

"That," he returned, with a touch of impatience, "is not the question."

But she persisted in making it the question; she divined where the weak spot in his armour was, and upon that spot she wisely concentrated the whole force of her attack. He ought, of course, to have told her frankly that he was not in love with her, that he had yielded to an impulse which he now sincerely regretted and that he was willing to make any amends which it might be in his power to make. Had he done so and shown a sufficiently resolute front, it is not impossible that the lady might have come to terms; for she would have had no particular objection to incurring his contempt, and upon his discretion she might, for obvious reasons, count. But he was too chivalrous to take ordinary care of himself, too honourable to shirk the logical results of his own actions and—despite his newly-born distrust of all women—too easily blinded to suspect the sincerity of this one. The joy (for such it really was to him) of believing himself the object of a disinterested passion, together with certain appeals to the human side of him in the use of which his companion was skilled, effected what remained to be done. At the end of a quarter of an hour he would have hesitated to swear that he did not love Lily Bradstreet.

She, on the other hand, did not hesitate to vow that she

would never do him the injury of becoming his wife. He had to argue with her, he had to implore her, he had to tell, in good faith, the most extravagant falsehoods before she could be prevailed upon to yield an inch, and even when her obstinacy at length broke down, she made Mrs. Leonard's acquiescence a *sine quâ non*.

"Don't you see," she tearfully protested, "how monstrous it would be of me to bring about a quarrel between you and your mother? That I will not and cannot do. I should be ready, for your sake, to bear the slights and sneers which I know I should have to bear if you were to marry me; in the long run I daresay I should live them down, and it would not be my fault if you ever repented of your bargain. But I haven't the strength, and—oh, forgive me for saying so, but I am afraid it is true!—I don't think you have the strength, either, to brave Mrs. Leonard."

"My mother is aware," he replied, "that in the last resort I shall neither quarrel with her nor succumb to her. Of course she will give us great trouble at first; but we must put up with that. Although I can't truthfully say that I expect anything but a reluctant assent from her, I am convinced that she will finally assent. More than that it would be scarcely reasonable to ask."

To ask as much was to ask no trifle, and well Miss Bradstreet knew it; but to obtain as much would be to obtain the assurance of triumph, and she had taken Lord Leonard's measure accurately enough to realise that it had now become a point of honour with him to overcome his mother's opposition. She said:

"I don't want to be unreasonable; only I am persuaded that, for your sake as well as for my own—a great deal more for your sake than for my own, indeed—I ought to insist upon Mrs. Leonard's assent, even though it should be reluctantly given. I wish I could feel persuaded that you ought to ask for it!"

She was persuaded, at all events, that he was going to ask for it, and in that comforting conviction she was so exultant that she had some difficulty in maintaining a fitting air of dejection. Tears, however, were always at her

command, and with these she so bedewed the front of his coat that when he quitted her he was himself deeply moved.

Many marriages have been brought to pass by means of similar tactics, and some of them have turned out better than they had any business to do. Leonard was taken in to the extent of imagining that his Lily adored him; he was not deceived, or only partially so, as to his personal sentiments. But if happiness was not for him, it was something to be able to confer happiness upon her. It was also something to be delivered from the persecution of other young women who demanded a less legitimate description of happiness. On reaching home, he found the entire house-party assembled at afternoon tea, and sundry jocular inquiries as to what he had been doing with himself since luncheon were addressed to him. But nobody, it may safely be assumed, had the least inkling of the dreadful truth, and certainly Mrs. Leonard had none. Her sensations were those of one who has been stricken by sudden paralysis when her son, following her after a time into the little room where she had for years been in the habit of attending to the estate business and which was still kept sacred from intruders, said quietly:

"I want to tell you, mother, that I am going to be married to Miss Bradstreet."

She convulsively gripped the arms of the chair on which she was seated behind her writing-table and glared at him for a whole minute in speechless horror.

"If you were not what you are, Leonard," she gasped out at last, "I should think that you must be either out of your mind or intoxicated!"

"It is because you are what you are, mother," he returned, "that I didn't attempt to break the news gently to you. Nothing, I know, could really have lessened the shock that this must be to you, and your nerves are as strong as your will. It was best to come straight to the point. The point is that I am going to marry Mrs. Vyse's governess, and the first thing to be done is to make it clear to you that I cannot be dissuaded from marrying her."

"Oh, but you *are* mad!" Mrs. Leonard ejaculated.

"No, I am perfectly sane. So sane that I fully realise how mad all other sane persons are sure to think me. Let me try to explain; though I can hardly hope to be understood. You know what I have been through, and you know, for I told you, that it was my wish and intention not to tempt fortune a second time. But you impress upon me—rightly, perhaps—that it is my duty to beget an heir. Well, if so, may I not at least claim the privilege of choosing for my wife one who loves me for my own sake, not because I am Lord Leonard nor because I have more thousands a year than I know how to spend?"

"And you think the position of governess in Mrs. Vyse's family so delightful that anybody who could be prevailed upon to relinquish it in order to become your wife must be such a person as you describe. Really, I wonder that you did not make assurance doubly sure by proposing to the scullery-maid!"

"What I think is that neither a scullery-maid nor a governess nor the daughter of a duke would be at all likely to lose her heart to me. If Lily is so exceptional as to love me, the circumstance of her being a governess is irrelevant. From my point of view, that is; from yours, of course, it would be a very relevant and most deplorable circumstance."

"Oh, an absolutely prohibiting one! It seems almost superfluous to inquire whether you seriously imagine that anything of the sort can be permitted."

"I am quite aware that it would never be permitted, supposing I had to crave permission; but I am not doing that; I am simply making an announcement. As I said just now, I want you to understand that I can't be forbidden or dissuaded."

"Not even when I tell you that you will have to choose between this woman and me? It is true that I have no longer any authority over you; but you may perhaps consent to think twice or three times before you decide to cut yourself off finally and permanently from all intercourse with your mother."

"Rather than do that I would give up anything, except my self-respect, which compels me to keep my word. I should say, however, that Lily is more amenable to pressure. She declares that she won't marry me without your approval."

"In that case," rejoined Mrs. Leonard, drawing a long breath, "she may make her mind easy—or uneasy. She certainly will not get my approval."

"I suppose not; but there are two considerations to which I will ask you to give the weight which I think they deserve. One of them is that if I do not marry Lily Bradstreet, I shall not marry at all. Will you, to save time, accept that as my unalterable determination? Of course I have reasons for saying so; but to state them would be a long, wearisome business, and I doubt very much whether it would be in my power to make them intelligible. The other is that I shall do my very utmost to overcome Lily's scruples, and I leave you to judge whether I am not pretty certain to succeed." After a short pause he resumed: "One thing more I may as well mention while I am at it. I suppose I don't look particularly eccentric; but I am capable of the wildest eccentricity. I have it in me to resign all my worldly possessions at a given moment to my next of kin and disappear. I believe you know that I have never cared a rush for my worldly possessions; but I am sure you don't know how passionately I long for the sea at times. It is the literal, sober truth that I would far rather be master of a coasting brig than a large landed proprietor. What duty obliges me to go on holding a position which I hate and in which, as a childless man, I shall have no interest beyond my own?"

In calling her son mad Mrs. Leonard had, of course, only employed a figure of speech; but she now felt positive that eccentric was too mild an adjective to apply to his mental condition. To reason with a man who could talk as he had been talking would evidently be idle, and although she was secretly alarmed, outward composure returned to her.

"I think," she observed coldly, "that the best plan will

be for me to see the governess. Perhaps you will be so kind as to let her know that I will receive her here tomorrow afternoon. You may add, if you like, that I have no intention of upbraiding her and that I am prepared to listen patiently to anything that she may have to say."

"Very well," answered Leonard, "I will deliver that message to her."

He remained silent for a moment and then drew nearer to the stern lady at the writing-table. "Mother," said he, "I have spoken roughly and peremptorily; when one means to assert one's independence it is as well to do so in a way which can't be misunderstood. But I hope you don't think that your disappointment and disapproval are matters of indifference to me. It is natural that you should be disappointed and that you should disapprove; only—I am going to marry Lily Bradstreet or nobody. That can't be helped."

As Mrs. Leonard was of opinion that it could be helped, she merely tightened her lips and nodded.

"So that we must not fall out over it," her son concluded, laying his fingers upon her irresponsible ones. "Things which can't be cured must be endured."

Mrs. Leonard had no notion of enduring the incurable calamity with which her house was threatened, nor did Miss Bradstreet feel by any means confident of victory when informed of the ordeal which she was called upon to face.

"I should not mind being scolded or abused," she despairingly told her suitor; "but the worst of it is that I shall be exhorted to spare you, and that I shan't be able to resist that appeal."

Nevertheless, she was firmly purposed to make a good fight for a coronet, and in this resolution she was fortified by Leonard's support, as well as by the account that he gave her of his conversation with his mother. When, on the following afternoon, she was ushered into the august presence of her mother-in-law presumptive, she had a plan of campaign ready and discerned clearly enough the point where pressure might be brought to bear upon her formidable adversary.

"Mrs. Leonard," said she, after listening in meek silence to remarks which were not over delicately worded and suggestions for a compromise which she was entitled to resent as insulting, "I don't wonder at your treating me as a mere adventuress; what you say is, no doubt, just what I should say if I were a great lady and if my son wanted to marry somebody far beneath him in rank. But may I, in justice to myself, remind you that, although he is not bound to abide by your decision, I am? You can prevent him from marrying me if you choose, and I shall not complain if you do."

"I trust that you are sincere," answered Mrs. Leonard austere; "for I have no option but to take you at your word. Pecuniary compensation"—

Miss Bradstreet checked her with uplifted hands. "Please don't hurt me by saying that again!" she implored. "You may think it presumptuous of me to love your son; but is it, after all, my fault that I do love him? I love him so much that I should have refused him without a moment's hesitation if I had not thought that there was a chance—just a chance—of my being able to save him from worse things. Not without your assistance, though. Between us, we might, I hope and believe, reconcile him to his appointed life; between us—for I need not say that, if you could have been brought to sanction what most people would call a most imprudent match, I should have made a point of your continuing to live with us and should have regarded myself as in every way your subordinate—we might conquer this desperate, overwhelming desire of his to shake off all his chains and go to sea. But since that cannot be, there is no more to be said. I know how great your influence over him is, and I cannot sufficiently trust my own to disobey you. Will you tell him that from me?"

The above subtle offer of collaboration gave Mrs. Leonard pause. Power and authority were very dear to her; her son could, and perhaps would, deprive her of both; viewed in the light of a *pis aller*, the governess might be worth considering. She gazed steadfastly into the lat-

ter's face and saw, or fancied she saw, the countenance of an amiable, malleable goose.

"I will be candid with you," said she. "I should extremely dislike to have you established here as Lady Leonard, and you yourself, I gather, recognise your obvious disqualifications. Yet, as you say, an even worse state of things is imaginable. I will speak again to my son upon the subject. Let it be clearly understood between us that I shall do my utmost to prevent him from making an unsuitable marriage; but, should he prove inflexible, I may, upon the conditions that you mention, withdraw my opposition. I ought perhaps to add that you seem to me disposed to behave as a right-minded person should."

Miss Bradstreet was not without histrionic talent. She flung herself suddenly upon her knees before Mrs. Leonard and, possessing herself of that lady's hand, pressed its somewhat salient knuckles to her lips.

"I am so glad," she murmured, "that you believe in me!—so glad you see that what I really want is what you want! If he can only be saved, either with me or without me, I shall be more than content. I have felt instinctively from the first that the decision would have to rest with you, and I ask nothing better than to leave it with you."

"You may," Mrs. Leonard responded, perceptibly mollified, "be a good girl; I am sure I hope you are. All I can say is that I shall act in accordance with what I conceive to be my plain duty."

If, on the homeward path, Miss Bradstreet abstained from throwing her hat up into the air, it was only because she realised the imprudence of such a demonstration when her grave suitor might be lurking somewhere in the vicinity. As a matter of fact, he was not far off, and after he had joined her, as he speedily did, a few words sufficed to set the seal upon their joint destinies.

CHAPTER XI

Lady Leonard in the Saddle

LORD LEONARD'S engagement and quickly following marriage were something more than a nine days' wonder both in his own country and in the wider circles affected by the fate of a personage so inevitably prominent. That he had made a deplorable fool of himself was, of course, the universal verdict, while his mother's supineness in allowing him so to do was a source of general stupefaction. Poor Mrs. Leonard, however, was not supine. She gave in as soon as she perceived that she had better make a virtue of necessity, and not a day sooner. Miss Bradstreet, it is true, conceded to her an unconditional right of veto; but her son did not, nor did he leave her in any doubt as to what his course of action would be, should she see fit to exercise it. He would either insist upon marrying the governess, in defiance of maternal prohibition and despite the young woman's own professed reluctance, or carry out his threat of practically abolishing himself, and which of these painful alternatives he really wished to adopt Mrs. Leonard could not for the life of her determine. It may be that he himself did not know; his diary throws little light upon the question. Only it seems certain that he had at that time quite made up his mind to be bothered no longer with schemes for an aristocratic alliance. It is likewise certain that he was never at any time in love with Lily Bradstreet and probable that he was convinced of her love for him. As for Mrs. Leonard, the prospect of certain compensations was, as we have seen, held out to her; she could gain nothing and might lose much by assuming an irreconcilable attitude.

What was naturally desirable, under the very distress-

ing circumstances, was that the wedding ceremony should be solemnised as quietly and privately as might be. It took place at the parish church early in the year, Mrs. Leonard, grave, impassive and unapproachable, lending it the sanction of her presence, as did also the bewildered General and Mrs. Vyse. Invitations to friends and relatives were dispensed with; but a presentation and an illuminated address from the tenants, together with sundry subdued rejoicings and benefactions, were deemed unavoidable.

"We must not appear to be conscious of disgracing ourselves, whatever some of us may feel," Mrs. Leonard drily remarked, after drawing up the requisite instructions.

She behaved, upon the whole, as well as any reasonable being could have expected her to behave; she offered explanations to nobody, nor had a single person the audacity to condole with her. If, on the conclusion of the nuptial rite, she went so far as to publicly embrace her daughter-in-law, that was rather a proof of personal courage and submission to the Divine will than evidence of an affection which she assuredly did not feel. She never—save in that religious sense which appears to be, somehow, compatible with undying rancour—forgave Leonard: on the other hand, she did not uselessly upbraid him.

"You have made your choice; it now remains for you to face and perform duties which your choice has rendered additionally difficult," was her farewell remark when he and his wife started on the first stage of a wedding journey which was to extend to the upper Nile.

Was there a gleam of triumph in the bride's red-brown eyes as she was whirled off towards the railway-station to an accompaniment of obligatory cheering? Mrs. Leonard half fancied that there was, hoped that it might only be fancy, and retired into the desolate house between a double line of servants who had doubtless drawn their own conclusions from the announcement made to them that there was to be no devolution of authority in the rule of the establishment. Her common sense forbade

her, perhaps, to believe in the permanency of the part assigned to her, but a period of regency she believed to be indispensable. Meanwhile, quite the best thing that the young couple could do was to betake themselves to Egypt and remain there until the curiosity stirred up by their extraordinary marriage should have had time to subside. All emotions, all excitements subside in time; although, alas! there are legal acts which no lapse of time can undo.

Lord Leonard, of course, knew absolutely nothing about his wife when he espoused her. What discoveries he may have made during prolonged wanderings in southern latitudes can only be conjectured, by reason of his inveterate reticence and of the very meagre and colourless entries relating to that winter and spring which his journal contains. What is certain is that, when he returned in the month of May to his London house, he did not exhibit the joyous aspect of one who has married for love and who counts the world well lost. Lady Leonard, on the other hand, was radiant. Also it soon became evident to all who were brought into contact with her that, whatever had been her aim in bestowing herself upon her somewhat saturnine consort, she had in nowise contemplated the abandonment of worldly pleasures as a result of that step. A great many people were brought into contact with her; for she was, after all, Lady Leonard now, and if she had once upon a time been somebody's governess, she had never, so far as was known, been anything worse. It was, with regard to her admission into so-called exclusive circles, a mere question of demeanour and *aplomb*, and in both respects she easily passed muster. Prosperity had the becoming and beautifying effect upon this handsome young woman that it has upon most mortals; the family diamonds were scarcely less indebted to her than she was to them; she was accepted civilly by great ladies and almost enthusiastically by their husbands. Mrs. Leonard, who had journeyed up to Grosvenor Place to receive the young couple on their return from foreign parts, looked on with mixed feelings at a social success which she had, as in duty bound, done something, though not very much, to promote.

"I see," she caustically remarked to her son, "that your wife will not bring discredit upon you, so long as she does not lose her head."

"I don't think," she replied, "that she is likely to do that."

"Well, time will show. She is at present a good deal elated, and one cannot wonder at her being so. A little more diffidence would not be out of place; still it is better, I daresay, that she should be self-possessed than shy and awkward. I do not complain."

The truth was that Mrs. Leonard would not have been sorry to be given some cause for complaint; for the spectacle of a lively, good-looking, but distinctly underbred woman carrying all before her is seldom a pleasing one to the rest of her sex. But Lily was admirable with her mother-in-law, to whose homilies she always lent a respectful ear and whom she never failed to consult (if she did not invariably obey) with reference to questions of costume and hospitality. The two ladies got on together as amicably as it was possible for two ladies whom nothing could prevent from eventually falling out to do, and in justice to the younger it must be said that she made many more concessions than she received.

It has been freely asserted that even in those early days of her married life Lady Leonard gave evidence of proclivities which afterwards earned her an unenviable notoriety; but there does not appear to be much substantial ground for that accusation. It may be taken for granted that she did not wish to jeopardise a position which she thoroughly enjoyed, and although her husband may have bored her, he probably had not yet begun to exasperate her. Her mother-in-law more than once bluntly rebuked her for "rolling her eyes" at men; but when she replied, with surprised contrition, that she could not help rolling them and meant nothing by it, she was perhaps only stating the truth. One could not, Mrs. Leonard reflected, mournfully mindful of the proverb relating to silk purses and sows' ears, expect her to be what neither nature nor training had made her. Nevertheless, it was increasingly and distressingly obvious that

she was not at all what she had meekly affected to be when humbling herself before one who might have denied her all her actual glories. There was nothing definite or tangible to object to in her conduct; yet she was not altogether satisfactory. She did not, for instance, devote herself to Leonard after the fashion which she had seemed to foreshadow, nor did she show signs of any desire more serious than that of amusing herself.

She amused herself that season a great deal more than her husband did. For him the London season had associations and memories to which he naturally made no verbal reference, but which it was out of his power to dismiss. Also he did not get on very well with her ladyship's friends, who were for the most part gay youths, and with whom he had little in common. He was a pretty constant attendant at the House of Lords, obtained some occasional work on committees, wrote verses in his too frequent leisure hours and did what was incumbent upon him in the way of entertainments which he found the reverse of entertaining. His enlightenment as to the state of Lily's affections and her motives for having married him was probably the more complete because they had no quarrels and because she was so evidently unconscious of being a disappointment. Mrs. Leonard, who had but few illusions to lose respecting her daughter-in-law, was less dejected, less apprehensive, if more outspokenly critical, than he.

But Mrs. Leonard's turn came when, in the month of July, a move was made down to the country. At Leonard's End the drawbacks of divided female authority soon began to manifest themselves in an acute form which had been temporarily warded off by the distractions of life in Grosvenor Place. Inevitable bickerings arose; the intervention of the head of the family was more than once demanded; and what could he, as a would-be just man, do but range himself on his wife's side?

"I try my best," Lily told him, not without plausibility, "to be patient and forbearing; I knew from the first that I should have to put up with rather more than my fair share of snubs and humiliations. But ought I, do you

think, to stand being ordered to pay certain calls on a certain day and then scolded, like a disobedient servant, because I had a headache that day and didn't go?"

It was in consideration of Lady Leonard's headaches and the state of her health that the grim Dowager consented to abate a few pretensions which she would not formally relinquish. A large establishment, she said, must either be managed in conformity with rule and discipline or not managed at all; a careless mistress made careless servants; punctuality was essential and attendance at family prayers should be considered a matter of obligation.

"If I impress these things upon your wife, it is for her good and because I really do not know for what other purpose I am here. You are well aware, I hope, that I am ready, at a word from you, to drop the reins and leave this house; my sole reason for remaining is that, until the event to which we are all looking forward is safely over, I believe that I am of some service to you both by doing so."

Unfortunately, the event alluded to took place at an earlier date than it should have done; still more unfortunately, its occurrence was accelerated, or thought to have been so, by a battle royal between Mrs. Leonard and her daughter-in-law upon the subject of nomenclature, the former lady being determined that the coming heir should bear the name of Hubert, while the latter was fantastically bent upon calling him Demetrius, after the hero of a translated Russian novel which had interested her. The heir took matters into his own hands by surviving his birth less than half an hour and defrauding the hastily-summoned parson. As for his mother, it was, during many ensuing days, a question whether she would not follow him. The most unfortunate incident of all, perhaps, was that she ultimately recovered; but Leonard, not possessing the gift of prophecy, and being filled with genuine concern and commiseration, could not realise that Mrs. Leonard probably did; although in due season she joined in publicly returning thanks to Heaven at the parish church for late mercies vouchsafed to her family.

No further mercies of a conspicuous order were vouchsafed to the denizens of Leonard's End. "Your mother," Leonard's convalescent wife said to him in so many words, "has killed our son and done her best to kill me. Don't you think we have endured about as much as we are called upon to endure?"

He was not quite sure whether he thought so or not, and Lily's language seemed to him to be exaggerated; but he was soon made aware that attempts to smooth things over were a waste of time and breath. Lady Leonard was excusably anxious to get rid of her mother-in-law; the Dowager, although not anxious to go, was resolved never to play second fiddle; there was, therefore, nothing to be done, save to await as silently as might be the explosion which both appeared to regard as a necessary preliminary to altered arrangements.

This took place shortly after her ladyship's restoration to complete health. She arose from her bed of sickness a changed woman—or, if not changed in nature, yet curiously so in speech and demeanour. She discarded the last shred of that submissiveness which had served her turn, and exhibited herself as a vulgar, not ill-humoured, rather coarse woman, who knew what her rights were and intended to claim them. She was of course entitled to give orders to the housekeeper, she was of course entitled to seat herself at the head of the table; both of which steps she took one day without prior warning and without apology. Furthermore, she saw fit to informally invite certain of the neighbours to dinner, although they did not happen to be quite the sort of guests whom it had been customary to receive on an informal footing at Leonard's End.

Against these proceedings the deposed Queen Regent made no overt protest. With compressed lips and a lowering brow, she ignored the proffered gage of battle, feeling well assured that worse was to come, and being resolute to conquer or be conquered in the panoply of strict rectitude. She only smiled when Lady Leonard, who was no horsewoman, insisted upon following the hounds, and smiled again when her ladyship was brought

home with a crushed hat and a rent habit. But at open, ostentatious, underbred flirtation she felt—as her supplanter may possibly have designed that she should—bound to draw the line. There were amongst the members of the local hunt sundry undesirable persons who did not mind sacrificing a day's sport for the sake of dancing attendance upon a good-looking woman of high social standing, and with one of these (it matters little with which, for in the sequel she flirted with them all) Lady Leonard chose to carry on after a fashion inadmissible in any decent household. So, at any rate, her mother-in-law roundly affirmed, and what followed was a foregone conclusion.

"I have put up with injuries," Lily told her husband; "you should not, and I am sure you will not, ask me to put up with gross and studied insults. If your mother likes to beg my pardon and withdraw her words, well and good; if she refuses, I must refuse to speak to her or eat my meals with her, that's all."

Mrs. Leonard was not the woman to beg anybody's pardon, much less to retract a statement to every syllable of which she adhered. She disdainfully gave instructions for the packing up of her belongings forthwith.

"I do not blame you," said she, in answer to Leonard's somewhat half-hearted pleas and expostulations; "so long as your wife does not bring public shame upon you, you have practically no choice but to support her, even against me. On the other hand, I have no choice but to leave this house. We have both been deceived by her; I only regret that the penalty is likely to be far more severe in your case than in mine."

"Is it quite fair to call Lily deceitful, mother?"

"Absolutely fair. Otherwise I should not call her so. As I say, I do not blame you for standing up for her, nor do I blame you as much as I blame myself for having been taken in by devices which it ought to have been easy enough to see through. Oh, I don't mean that I ever mistook her for a gentlewoman, and I can't imagine that you did either. But I did not, I confess, suspect her of being what she is."

"Of being what she is?"

Mrs. Leonard nodded, with grim complacency. "Of being what I felt compelled to tell her that she is. Not, perhaps, already disreputable, but in a fair and sure way to become so."

After so outrageous an accusation as that—an accusation, too, supported by no evidence worthy of the name—there was nothing more to be said. Mrs. Leonard, however, had a few more words to say.

"I am sorry to tell you that your wife is a fool, and that, heartless and selfish as she unquestionably is, she does not, I greatly fear, see her own interest plainly enough to steer clear of open scandal. Her heartlessness can be no secret to you; for you must have seen that she did not care in the least about the poor, dear baby's death. And it is only too likely that, after her mishap, she will have no more children. A sad mistake has been made; but that cannot be helped now. I have done what I could; henceforth I can only pray for you."

If Mrs. Leonard prayed for her son's welfare—and there is little reason to doubt that she did—her prayers, possibly, were not offered up in the proper spirit; for they were rewarded by no such success as attended her valedictory prophecy.

CHAPTER XII

Logical Results

"YOUR friend, Lord Leonard," General Vyse once remarked to the humble compiler of this narrative, "is one of the very best men in England, and nobody can deny that he has intellectual powers far above the average; yet he has been more or less of a failure at every job that he has ever taken in hand. In politics he doesn't count; nobody has ever thought of offering him office, though he is a good debater and only speaks when he has thoroughly mastered his subject. In literature you would class him, no doubt, amongst the mediocrities, notwithstanding the mass of poems and essays that he has turned out. As for his domestic life, everybody knows what a hash he has made of that. The reason of it, I imagine, is that he has never contrived to throw his heart into anything. He really doesn't care, and a man who doesn't care is apt to do queer things. Whether he cared for my poor daughter before she eloped with her rascally husband I'm sure I can't tell; at the time it seemed to me that he took his misfortune pretty coolly, and one may almost say that he helped to bring it upon himself. Then, without rhyme or reason, he marries our ex-governess, who for two years leads him the deuce's own life. Then—but you are as well acquainted as I am with his other eccentricities. I can only account for him, as I say, upon the assumption that he doesn't care."

The worthy General's diagnosis does not quite hit the mark; it would perhaps be more true to say that Leonard's capacity for caring exhausted itself upon a few abstractions and upon a very few people. For these he cared so intensely that, with regard to the rest, philoso-

phy came to his aid. Something of a logician and something of a fatalist, he accepted as inevitable and consequent what many of us waste time in fighting or denouncing. It was thus that he regarded the conduct of Lady Leonard, who, if she did not "lead him the deuce's own life" in the sense usually attached to that phrase, must have rendered existence perpetually distasteful and humiliating to him during the period alluded to. Her mother-in-law was justified in stigmatising her as a fool; for the meed of shrewdness and cunning which had enabled her to bring off a great *coup* did not suffice to content her with the very substantial results of her achievement. It was well enough to be a peeress, to be furnished with an abundance of fine clothes and to have the use of the splendid family jewels; but her restless vanity demanded something more than that. What she really rejoiced in was the homage and subjugation of men, and, since she was not fastidious, all was fish that came to her net. The harvest of her net, cast with a broad sweep, included some very queer fish indeed—so queer that Leonard's complaisance in receiving them under his roof was not generally held to redound to his credit. He might, had strictures been addressed to him and had he deemed them worthy of reply, have answered that he had no pretension to choose Lady Leonard's friends for her, or he might have said quite truthfully that he could not see any important difference between Mr. A. and Major B. His attitude was one of complete detachment, and he might, it must be owned, have adopted a worse. What is a man who is perfectly aware of having permanently yoked himself to an inferior and unsympathetic being to do, save shrug his shoulders and hold his tongue? He ought, perhaps, to stop short of shutting his eyes; yet it may be doubted whether Lord Leonard would have gained much by keeping his open. For her ladyship, if reckless in some ways, was circumspect in others. The upshot of it all was that they did not quarrel, that their contempt was mutual and that they seldom interfered with one another.

After a couple of years or more of married life they were dining, one evening, at a restaurant in Paris—

whither Lady Leonard liked to betake herself at Easter for sumptuary and other purposes—when an Englishman who was seated at an adjoining table caught sight of them, burst out laughing and presently advanced, with outstretched hand. It was like Archie Morant's impudence to take that bold method of renewing a broken friendship, and it was not unlike Leonard to acquiesce in it, with a faint smile. A few minutes later orders had been given to the attendant waiters, and four persons who might well have been, but were not, embarrassed by their encounter had grouped themselves round the same board.

That they were not embarrassed was doubtless due to the cool good humour with which Archie ignored all occasion for their being so. Serene, eupeptic, and easy-going as of yore, he saw no reason to apologise for having once supplanted a man who was now, like himself, a Benedict of two years' standing, and indeed he was far less interested in Leonard's possible sentiments than in the personality of the former governess, who struck him as quite astonishingly *embellie*.

As much could not be said for Juliet. The furtively questioning eyes of her former lover detected instantly that she was not happy and that she had finally taken leave of youth, young though she still was in years. A swift flash of recognition and mutual comprehension passed between the pair; mutely they said to one another what it was most unlikely that they would ever say by word of mouth, and through the suave, flat commonplaces that they exchanged pierced, then and thereafter, a note of more or less consoling sympathy. The difference between them was that Leonard was bound by no ties of affection to his deplorable yokefellow, whereas Juliet still despairingly adored hers; but it took him some little time to discover that.

Mr. and Mrs. Morant, it appeared, were domiciled at Neuilly. Considerations of economy and convenience had decided them to let their English house and they anticipated a prolonged sojourn in foreign lands.

"It is rather hard upon Archie to be shut out from every kind of sport," Juliet remarked; "but, after all,

one can't expect to get much sport even in England unless one has money. And he manages to amuse himself."

"I suppose he does," said her grave neighbour.

Archie was already amusing himself visibly with Lady Leonard, whose developed charms and rather loud garrulity seemed to have a fascinating effect upon him. She and he were getting on together so rapidly, and there was such a noise in the public room which both preferred to the stuffy privacy of a *cabinet particulier*, that the other couple, though so close to them, could converse without risk of being overheard. Lord Leonard and Mrs. Morant, however, had nothing to communicate to one another which might not have been shouted out at the top of their voices. Independently of the medium of speech, they were able to say, "Well, we have brought this upon ourselves, and it does not become us to grumble." That, subject to the difference aforesaid, was the attitude which they assumed and which characterised their future relations.

"If you are staying any time in Paris," Mrs. Morant politely said, "I hope you will not be too deeply engaged to penetrate as far as our suburb. I should like to show you my baby boy."

"I should like very much to see him, thank you," Leonard replied, in the old, familiar voice which sounded so snubbing, but which, as she knew, was but the outward and visible sign of an ineradicable shyness."

"I begin to be afraid," she went on, with a sigh and a laugh, "that his grandparents never will. Mother and the children write to me occasionally; but we are still unforgiven, still in disgrace. I suppose you sometimes see my people?"

"Oh, yes, sometimes. They are—they are all right," was his inadequate response to this tentative and slightly wistful appeal.

He added, after a moment: "But we don't see a great deal of our neighbours. The conditions of country life are so altered nowadays, and we depend chiefly for society upon our house-parties, which are composed for the most part of my wife's London friends."

Who in the world could they be? Miss Bradstreet had of yore had few friends either in London or elsewhere, and something in his tone seemed to imply that her present guests were not of the class formerly to be met with at Leonard's End. But the subject was not pursued.

"Leonard," called out her ladyship shrilly from the other side of the table. "Mr. Morant wants us to go to *déjeuner* to-morrow at Neuilly. He says we shan't get anything good to eat; but I tell him that won't matter so far as you are concerned, because you were never known to have an appetite. As for me, I'm not particular; ham and eggs will do me, so long as there is a sufficient supply of them."

Probably Lily enjoyed being insolent to Mrs. Morant as much as flirting with Mrs. Morant's husband. "Don't bother about us, my dear," she went on, patronisingly addressing one to whom she had erst shown herself so subservient; "we shall be charmed to take you as we find you."

Juliet charitably averted her eyes from Leonard, who, however, did not wince. His wife, being what she was, was absolutely certain to act as she was doing, and he expected nothing else of her. Nevertheless, he would fain have declined the proffered hospitality.

This he was not permitted to do; for Lily, who was strongly under the impression that she had inaugurated a conquest which she had vainly essayed of yore, was in the highest of spirits and was bent upon pushing her successful attack home. To bring at one blow the formerly disdainful Morant to her feet and to trample beneath them a lady who had committed the unpardonable offence of cutting her out—was not that well worth a pilgrimage out to Neuilly with the prospect of a badly served meal at the end of it?

Disappointment awaited her on the morrow with respect to the *déjeuner*, which was well cooked, well served and even luxurious. Never, at the lowest ebb of his fortunes, was Archie Morant known to practise economy in the matter of meat and drink. There were, however, evidences of poverty about the small establishment which

were doubtless as balm to the soul of the ex-governess. The house had a dreary, half-inhabited look, which might have been accounted for by the fact that indeed only two of its nominal denizens really inhabited it and that the greater part of their time was spent in the nursery. Archie seldom breakfasted and never dined at home: he confessed as much, with airy, good-humoured impenitence.

"I'm not a domestic man," he owned; "I can't imagine living in Paris and dining anywhere except at a restaurant. Luckily, one can almost always pick up a pal; for it isn't often that the missus honours me as she did last night. As a rule, she prefers the society of the baby. But then she's a very domestic woman."

Juliet laughed, and had the air of accepting this as a compliment. She was not, Leonard noticed, upon bad terms with her husband, nor did Archie appear to be in every sense a bad husband, plain though it was that his matrimonial fetters sat lightly upon him. By degrees Leonard began to understand the quasi-maternal affection which had replaced Juliet's love for his old schoolfellow, and which explained her indulgent smile when the latter openly avowed, not to say boasted of, sundry *fredaines*.

"Archie's tastes and admirations are of the most catholic order," she leniently remarked, in partial excuse for some of those upon which he seemed to pride himself. "He falls a victim to what he is pleased to call female beauty whether he encounters it at an Embassy or on the stage of a *café chantant*. And if you only saw some of the women whom he considers beauties!"

Well, that was one way of taking infidelity, and possibly not an unwise one. Leonard's own mental posture should have enabled him, and to some extent did enable him, to sympathise with it. But all he said was:

"I don't think they would interest me. My own tastes and admirations are rather limited."

They were, at all events, unalterable. He had been angry with Juliet, he had been deceived in her, he had put her away from his thoughts; yet she remained the only woman in the world whom it was possible for him to love.

As for forgiving her, a much harder-hearted man than he would surely have done so, in consideration of the palpable Nemesis which had overtaken her. Only—there was nothing to be said; so he said nothing.

The baby, carried by an apple-cheeked Norman nurse, was handed round with the coffee, like a liqueur, and made itself objectionable after the malignant manner of its species. Leonard feebly observed that it was a fine child, while Lily, firmly warding off its moist embrace, proclaimed, with a loud laugh, that she loathed the young of the human race, a sentiment in which the baby's father expressed his unreserved concurrence.

"Heaven be praised! I have none of my own," she added, staring somewhat defiantly at her hostess, as who should say, "Don't flatter yourself that you score even there, my dear!"

The two ladies were evidently not going to hit it off together. It was in unmistakeably provocative accents that Lady Leonard presently resumed: "I am dying to see Madelon Lombard at La Scala; but Mr. Morant is afraid your British prudishness will never allow you to accompany us to such a place and keep me in countenance."

Juliet glanced reproachfully at her husband. "Really, Archie, you are too bad! You know very well that ladies can't go to La Scala."

"I know no such thing," Archie smilingly returned. "French ladies don't go there, I admit; but I have seen Englishwomen of the highest rank and respectability listening to Madelon times out of mind, and they appeared to me to be enjoying themselves prodigiously. I'll take a box for to-morrow night, and you can blush in the obscurity of its recesses if you feel you ought to blush. Lady Leonard won't; because it's ten to one against her understanding any of the allusions."

His manner to her ladyship was just a trifle impertinent; but she did not seem to resent that, nor did Leonard, who only asserted marital authority to the extent of remarking:

"I don't think we must ask Mrs. Morant to keep us in

countenance if we choose to patronise low *cafés-chantants*, Lily."

That perhaps, made it rather difficult for Mrs. Morant to refuse. At any rate, she announced, after a moment of hesitation, her willingness to join the projected party. "Madelon Lombard is a personage of world-wide celebrity," she half-apologetically remarked. "Of course it is everybody's duty to see her, and, as Archie says, the smart English ladies probably don't discriminate between La Scala and other stages upon which she gives her performances. I am not so much afraid of what she may do or say as I am of the minor *artistes* whom I suppose we shall have to bear before she comes on."

"Oh, La Scala is all right; lots of decent people go to La Scala!" Archie declared. "Moreover, what the ear doesn't hear the heart doesn't grieve over, and Lady Leonard can't possibly be familiar with the latest Parisian slang."

Lady Leonard's acquaintance with the French language was of the early schoolroom order, and of Parisian slang, old or new, she knew no more than she did of Sanscrit. But she was conducted, on the following evening, to an entertainment of which the outrageous impropriety required no previous training or education to be detected. Not that she minded. Far from minding, she showed her appreciation of its broad witticisms by unrestrained laughter and maintained her position in the front of the box, whence Juliet, after a despairing glance at Leonard, was fain to withdraw hurriedly. Archie, nothing loth, took possession of his wife's vacated seat. There was something about the expression of his back which seemed to intimate that he did not dislike thus publicly exhibiting himself by the side of a handsome woman, whose flashing diamonds were perhaps a trifle out of place in such surroundings. But it was neither Archie's black back nor Lily's generously displayed white one that engaged Leonard's attention. More worthy of study, as well as more provocative of indignation and vexed contrition, was a face close beside him, which was fulfilling prediction by blushing hotly. He could not refrain from saying:

"I hope you know that I had no idea it was going to be quite as bad as this."

"One can never tell exactly what sort of songs will be provided for the audience in places of this kind," answered Juliet. "I don't suppose Archie knew either."

"He ought to have known, and he had no business to bring you here," was Leonard's prompt and rather stern rejoinder.

That there was another lady whom Mr. Morant had had no business to treat with the same lack of respect was a consideration which apparently escaped him. At any rate, he did not refer to it, but fell back in his chair, grimly, resignedly silent. Full well was he aware that nothing would induce Lily to beat a retreat before having seen Madelon Lombard.

The renowned Madelon swept at length on to the squalid little stage and regaled her hearers with a couple of ditties which, rendered in her inimitable style, may have deserved the rapturous applause accorded to her and them. But one, if not two, of her hearers refused her even the bare homage of their notice. To Leonard the whole scene, as viewed from the dark corner in which he was ensconced, was odiously significant, deplorable, tragic. He remembered Archie Morant a fresh, clear-eyed, healthy cadet on the *Britannia*, he remembered his Juliet amongst the refinements of her English home; he saw them now, matured, disenchanted, inevitably lowered, mutually tolerant, reluctantly (surely it must be reluctantly!) united for life, and if he longed for a horsewhip, it was not because he ignored the hopeless futility of any such weapon. What he did ignore was that he himself was the subject of a compassion as profound as that which he was lavishing upon his neighbour; for the sentiment of self-pity was one in which he had long ceased to indulge. It was so entirely a matter of course that a man who had voluntarily wed Lily should receive dust and ashes, not to say dirt, as his daily rations!

"A thoroughly jolly evening!" Lady Leonard exclaimed, when he and she were driving homewards together.

"Glad you enjoyed it," returned her taciturn spouse.

"I did. Oh, if you mean that you didn't, nobody expected that of you. Mrs. Morant was shocked, I suppose, wasn't she? She has lost her looks, such as they were; but I never admired her much myself. As for Mr. Morant, he is handsomer than ever. And much better company than he used to be," she added, with a gratified giggle.

"Morant," observed Leonard, "is a great many things, good and bad. Until this evening I have always thought he was, amongst others, a gentleman."

"Bless us and save us! are you actually paying me the compliment of being jealous, for once?"

"No; but I think he might have spared his wife the insult of such an exhibition as we have just witnessed."

"Oh, is that it? Never mind; I daresay you consoled her in the background. You're quite welcome, you know. *Libre à vous*, as they say over here."

"I assure you," returned Leonard, "that they don't say that, either here or anywhere else, if they are at all well-bred people." For indeed he was in an unusually bad humour.

Her ladyship, who was in an extremely good one, only laughed aloud. "But I thought it was an understood thing that I am not well-bred," said she.

Then she desisted from conversation and amused herself, during the remainder of the drive, by warbling a semitone flat, the refrain of one of Madelon Lombard's ballads.

CHAPTER XIII

Tit for Tat

TO the generous amongst human beings—but these, to be sure, form an insignificant section of the race—an opportunity of paying off old scores comes invariably as a disappointment. In the first place, it is not worth while, and in the second, there is little satisfaction to be got out of a victory which is the result of extraneous circumstances. Lady Leonard, however, being in no wise a generous person, was jubilant and triumphant. Chance had enabled her to bring to her feet a man who had never so much as noticed that she had any feet, save when an alleged sprained ankle had forced him to examine one of them; chance also had provided her with an occasion for humiliating a lady against whom she had not, it is true, any real grievance, yet who had been irritatingly kind and unpardonably patronising to her in less prosperous days. Therefore she rubbed her hands and proclaimed her intention of spending several more weeks in Paris.

Leonard raised no objection. He never did object to his wife's plans, since he had so few of his own to be disarranged, and it may be that at the back of his mind there lurked a vague, sick longing to see just a little more of Juliet, whom he could neither help nor console. For the rest, he was languidly interested in an inquiry relating to international statistics which the Embassy people gave him facilities for prosecuting. His diary for this period records frequent diplomatic and official dinners, to which his wife appears to have been invited, and at which, no doubt, she rejoiced in displaying her jewels, her new frocks and her white shoulders. "Dreadfully bored" is

his curt comment upon most of them; but these words are omitted in connection with a garden-party offered by Her Britannic Majesty's representative, one fine afternoon, to Mr. and Mrs. Morant and a few hundred others.

Lady Leonard, anyhow, was not bored that afternoon. She lost no time in beckoning Archie to her side; she flirted with him in the style which had latterly become her only style—in one, that is to say, which challenged and courted observation—she led him into a secluded corner of which the seclusion was but nominal, and lent a serenely complacent ear to his honeyed words. His words, naturally, had to be honeyed; it would have been very unlike him to refuse, in any case, what was so palpably solicited. But, as a matter of fact, he was really smitten with this handsome, well-dressed, rather unrefined woman, whose fascinations he had so unaccountably failed to realise during an earlier phase of their acquaintance.

"How blind I was two years ago!" he sighed, while his clear blue eyes sought and boldly fixed themselves upon her red-brown ones.

"I can't bring the same accusation against myself," Lady Leonard calmly rejoined; "I saw that you were bent upon making a mistake—it *has* been a mistake, come!—and I foresaw that you wouldn't be very long in repenting of it."

"Yet my making it was more due to you than to anybody else," he remarked, in accents of tender reproach.

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "Does that really surprise you?"

"Oh, if you mean that I simply didn't count, except as a *Deus ex machinâ*, and that poor Juliet's loss was your very substantial and material gain! But I can't think that you were so cynical and cold-blooded."

"Can't you? Well, you had better try to imagine some other motive, then. Why, by the way, do you call Mrs. Morant 'poor Juliet'?"

Mrs. Morant was at that moment standing within thirty yards or so of the chairs on which the couple had seated themselves. Her face, as she glanced in their direction, expressed a certain impatience and annoyance;

she was wearing a dress which had lost its first freshness, and her hat belonged to the dead-and-gone epoch of the previous year. She was so obviously and in every sense poor that Lady Leonard's question answered itself, and for that reason, possibly, Archie left it unanswered.

"Upon my word," said he, "I can't arrive at your motive for bringing repentance and affliction upon me."

"Not even as a punishment for blindness?"

"That sounds just a little bit exaggerated."

"It is impossible to exaggerate the offensiveness of such offences. Don't grab my hand, please. Leonard wouldn't like it if he saw you, and he may catch sight of you at any moment; for he is struggling to approach Mrs. Morant, who, I am sure, won't fail to draw his attention to us."

"Quite the last thing that she is likely to do; you haven't fathomed the depths of Juliet's discretion and good-nature. She isn't in love with me, you know."

"Isn't she?"

"Oh, dear, no!—not at this time of day. I suppose the truth is that we were not really in love with one another when we married; though we fancied that we were. Lady Leonard—Lily—I want to tell you something."

"Then," returned her ladyship, laughing and rising, "I am afraid it will have to wait. You look as if you were capable of telling me things quite out of harmony with the scene and the circumstances."

Archie got up also. Scrutinising her mirthful countenance, he thought he might safely venture upon a direct, frontal attack, and murmured, "Where?—when?"

Her merriment arrived at loud vocal expression. "Nowhere, of course!—never!" she replied. "You are like one of those splendidly audacious gentlemen whom one meets in French novels and whom not one of the female characters ever dreams of resisting. Did you expect me to answer joyfully that I shall be driving in the Bois to-morrow afternoon between four and five o'clock, as I am on most afternoons, and that I sometimes leave the carriage at the far end of the lake and take a constitutional? My dear Mr. Morant, you are in too great a

hurry to jump to conclusions. Your wife may or may not have been in love with you when she married you; but let me assure you that I know somebody who was not in love with you then and isn't now."

She was not speaking the truth, nor did he believe her. It is probable that women of Lady Leonard's type do not know what love means, but it is certain that they are extremely well acquainted with an emotion which goes by that name, and for nobody in her life had Lily experienced the said emotion in so intense a degree as for her present interlocutor. Nevertheless, she allowed herself the luxury and the revenge of tantalising him. He obtained nothing more from her, save a playful blow across the shoulders from the handle of her sunshade, and when she presently dismissed him, he was not quite sure—only almost so—that he had taken her measure.

It is scarcely necessary to state that Archie Morant was at the far end of the Bois de Boulogne lake on the following afternoon, nor will anybody be surprised to hear that he waited an hour there in vain. He himself was not surprised. Judging by the light of previous experience, he expected to make at least three futile expeditions to the spot which Lady Leonard had so pointedly named, and his anticipations were verified. They were further verified when, on the fourth afternoon, he saw a charmingly and expensively arrayed lady descend from a hired landau in his vicinity and saunter carelessly towards him, her long feather boa fluttering in the spring breeze and her ruddy locks fired by the spring sunshine. She greeted him laughingly and with lifted brows, on being accosted, as her manner was. She had very white, strong teeth.

"Every day?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes; every day."

"I thought you would. That was why I really couldn't resist coming all the way out here to see. Rather pretty of you, I must say; but an awful waste of time. However, since here we are, and since you have wasted the time and taken the trouble, I can't refuse to listen to what you were so anxious to tell me. Well?"

He kept her in suspense for a space of time no longer

than was required to conduct her into a side-alley, of which he satisfied himself that she and he were the sole occupants. But the impassioned avowal which broke forthwith from his lips fell a trifle flat.

"One has heard all that once or twice before," was her calm comment upon his eloquence; "I am accustomed to declarations of this kind."

"Accustomed to them?" he jealously echoed.

"Oh, yes; I encourage them; they amuse me. Leonard, as you may imagine, doesn't amuse me."

"I should think not!"

"No, he doesn't. In point of fact, he bores me atrociously, and would bore me beyond all endurance, if it were not that he isn't, to do him justice, obtrusive in his attentions. Mrs. Morant, I daresay, is."

It was something of a disappointment to Lady Leonard to learn that Mrs. Morant was nothing of the sort, and to hear that scandalously treated wife spoken of in terms of not ungrateful appreciation. A part of Archie's unquestionable charm resided, no doubt, in the boyish, irresponsible candour with which he always proclaimed himself to be what he was and gave other people the credit, so far as he could discern it, of being what they were. But this peculiarity of his did not charm his present hearer, who was not desirous of being included by her admirer's wife in a general, disdainful amnesty.

"You seem," she remarked, "to be blessed with a singularly accommodating helpmate."

"Well, yes. But then, as I told you the other day, she isn't in love with me."

"And I believe I also told you the other day that I have the best of reasons for sympathising with her."

Archie heaved a prodigious sigh and made a fresh start. Lady Leonard, it appeared, demanded some wooing; but he did not much mind that, being inured to such superfluous feminine exactions. That his wooing would end after the customary fashion he had felt comfortably assured from the moment when he saw her step out of her landau: not for the mere pleasure of making a fool of him and holding him at arm's length had she ordered her

coachman to drive her to that remote trysting-place. Meanwhile, perfunctory siege operations must be undertaken, he supposed.

Now, it so chanced that at that very time two pedestrians were drawing nearer and nearer to this wholly unprincipled couple whose vicinity, had the latter been aware of it, would have annoyed one of them and delighted the other. Not without hesitation, not without somewhat overstrained searchings of the heart, had Leonard made up his mind to do what he so very badly wanted to do and pay a second visit to Juliet at Neuilly. For he was almost as scrupulous as his wife was the reverse, and although he knew that his betrothed of two years ago no longer loved him, if indeed she had ever done so, the sight of her had left him in no doubt as to the fact that he had never really ceased to love her. So that it was perhaps his duty to give her a wide berth. Upon reflection, however, this did not seem to be such a very clear duty. Whom, after all, could he possibly injure by indulging in the rare luxury of commune with a more or less kindred spirit? Certainly not Juliet, certainly not Morant, still more certainly not Lily; and if his own standard of what was perfectly straight and honourable should be in some faint degree violated, that was his affair. It would not, at worst, be violated save in a very faint degree. Accordingly, on that warm, sunny afternoon, he had himself driven to the shabby little villa which struck him as so pathetically symbolic of Juliet's fate, and was rewarded by encountering at the gate Mrs. Morant, the Norman nurse and the baby, who were just then stepping forth to take the air.

"I only came to pay my respects upon the chance of finding you at home," he began, in his shy, chilling way; "you must not, of course, allow me to interfere with your walk."

"Don't interfere with it; join us in it for a little way," returned Juliet, looking, as in truth she felt, pleased to see the intruder. "That is, unless you object to exhibiting yourself in the company of such an evident *bonne bourgeoisie*."

He was not likely to be troubled with objections of that order, nor was he hampered for long by the company of the nurse and the baby, to whose slow rate of progress his stride had some difficulty in accommodating itself. Juliet presently dismissed them, with instructions, willingly obeyed, to seek out their congeners in the *Champs Elysées*; but she did not dismiss Lord Leonard.

"Are you in a hurry?" she asked. "Would you care to come with me as far as the Bois? I can't sit indoors in such lovely weather."

"I will go with you as far as you will take me and put up with me; it isn't every day that I am offered the greatest pleasure that is left for me in this world," was his reply, delivered with such an abrupt, vibrant change of intonation that she glanced at him, laughing softly, as she had sometimes done in the forfeited days when he had been her lover and when she had been almost, yet never quite, sure that she loved him.

So she took him rather a long way, diverging as soon as possible from the frequented track of equipages and pedestrians, and, as they walked, they conversed about no matter what—each happily convinced of the other's fellow-feeling and independent of the clumsy medium of speech. Nevertheless, some measure of indiscretion became at last well-nigh unavoidable, and it was Leonard who, characteristically and à propos of nothing at all, exclaimed on a sudden:

"Do you know, I can't in the least account for your having done what you have done!"

"I should have thought," she returned, with a slight smile, "that my behaviour was a good deal more easily accounted for than yours. I married Archie for the simple and sufficient reason that I loved him. Many women could tell you that there is nothing surprising in that. But"—

He hurriedly anticipated and replied to her unspoken question. "Oh, no, of course not; but I had to marry somebody, and I detest smart ladies, and she admired my poems, or said she did. Not that it matters, or that I matter. I didn't mean that I was surprised at your hav-

ing fallen in love with Morant; what I don't understand, what I can't account for, is why you should acquiesce so submissively in the kind of life to which he seems to have condemned you."

"Well, there again—don't you think so?—it is more easy to explain me than to explain you. The reason that I have given you remains. One doesn't love people because they are virtuous or noble or all that one would like them to be, but just because they are themselves. I know what Archie is and what he really can't very well help being, poor fellow! I know that he cares for me in his way, I know that he has very few, if any, secrets from me, and I know that he is sure to come to me when he is in serious trouble. Why should I insist upon his being what he is not?"

This profession of philosophy accorded so well with Leonard's own habitual attitude of mind that he could make no adequate rejoinder; yet he hated to think that Juliet was no better off than he. "And so," said he, after holding his peace for a minute, "you accept the 'many women' of whom you speak without a murmur or a pang?"

"Not, to be truthful, quite without a pang. If I don't murmur, it is because there would not be the least use in murmuring, and because I prefer my bone, such as it is, to a shadow. Do I make out a case for myself?"

"Oh, you make out a case," Leonard answered rather moodily; "I can't call it a satisfactory one."

"Perhaps as satisfactory as somebody else's though," she suggested, smiling.

He made a gesture half impatient, half resigned. "It was out of the question for my case to be satisfactory. Where I have the pull over you is that I am honestly indifferent, whereas you, by your own showing, are not. Or do you think that that gives you a pull over me?"

Juliet appeared to be debating this point while she paced on beneath the fresh, sun-dappled foliage. "Well," she ended by remarking, "if I am capable of being hurt and you are not, of course you have so far the best of it.

Unfortunately, we are both capable of being humiliated, I am afraid."

It was like a dramatic confirmation of that utterance on her part that a turn of the road confronted them, before he could make any reply, with their respective life-partners. To three out of the four persons thus unexpectedly compelled to exchange greetings the encounter was thoroughly distasteful, but to the fourth it presented itself in the light of an excellent and most opportune joke. Lily's unrestrained laughter woke the echoes.

"Caught all round!" she joyously exclaimed. "The only thing to be done after this is to cry quits, isn't it? My dear Mrs. Morant, I make you welcome to my husband, who, I am sure, can't be half as entertaining company as yours."

This atrocious and uncalled-for way of putting matters completed the discomfort of the others and reduced them to an annoyed, abashed silence. Archie hated to be found out in the initial stages of his flirtations, Juliet was vexed on Lord Leonard's account, while Leonard was indignant on hers. Of course, however, they could not continue to stand mutely surveying one another; of course something was said which enabled them presently to part on amicable terms and in changed companionship. But Lady Leonard, while being escorted back to her carriage, was treated to a marital rebuke such as she had not heretofore been asked to stand.

"Let me beg you," her husband said—though his tone was by no means that of a suppliant—"to drop this. You will allow that I am not, as a rule, exacting or interfering; but I reserve the right to an occasional objection, and I must request you to be so good as to respect Mrs. Morant's domestic peace."

"Your chivalry surpasses anything that I ever heard of!" cried Lily, laughing more loudly than ever. "Pray how about Mr. Morant's domestic peace, which it strikes me that you are demurely bent upon undermining? For the matter of that, how about our own?"

"I was not aware that we had any."

"Weren't you? Well, I was not aware that we were in a state of domestic war; though I warn you that hostilities will be apt to break out if you mount the high horse and try to ride over me roughshod. No, no! fair play is a jewel, and what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Devote yourself to your faded Juliet to your heart's content; not a word of complaint shall pass my lips, I promise you. But leave me the privilege of consoling her neglected husband. I shall not imitate her by eloping with him, you may be sure."

"You will neither console him nor elope with him," returned Leonard quietly; "for we shall go back to London in a day or two."

CHAPTER XIV

An Escapade

LORD LEONARD, who, all his life long, was so little understood even by those who knew him best, has frequently, not to say generally, been called a weak man. Weak he was not, when once his duty had become clear to him, and he perceived that it was on every ground his duty to quit Paris; but what is to be done with a lady who takes to her bed, declaring herself far too ill to think of travelling? Lily was as physically strong as a woman could be; yet she simulated indisposition with so much skill that the doctor who was called in backed her up and pronounced a period of rest to be urgent in her ladyship's condition of health. He likewise, as soon as she saw fit to show symptoms of convalescence, deprecated a return to the fatigues of the London season, thus earning his fee, which it may be conjectured (for in the case of that patient all conjectures are permissible) was not solely of a pecuniary nature.

Archie Morant called daily to inquire, saw Leonard, did not ask to see Lily, displayed as much concern as the circumstances demanded, but no more, and bore himself upon the whole in such a manner as to allay suspicion. The outcome of it all was that the doctor's advice was taken and that no more was said about an immediate move to Grosvenor Place. The following excerpt from Leonard's diary seems so concisely illuminating that it may as well be inserted here:—

"I sat with Juliet," he writes, "for a long time this afternoon and she sang to me with that singularly thrilling, sympathetic voice of hers, which I think has gained something in compass. She is to appear at a Charity

Concert to-night, she told me, in the house of some great banker or other who has not invited us. I am glad she has the consolation of music; it is evidently a real one to her. Of course I cannot but be glad if she also finds, as she gives me to understand that she does, some source of consolation in my frequent visits. Personally, I can't make up my mind whether I get more pain than pleasure out of them or the reverse; either way, they are quite insignificant, quite innocent. We no longer talk about her husband, nor do we mention my wife: perhaps we both feel that the relations of two persons so entirely selfish and so remarkably well able to take care of themselves are hardly worth the fuss that we were ready to make about them at the outset. Whether Lily, now that she has begun to go out again amongst her friends, meets Morant I do not know; the chances are that she does, and that a species of flirtation is kept up. So long as Juliet is spared a spectacle which might possibly be annoying to her, what does it matter?"

Then follows a criticism upon Juliet's nature and disposition which is too lengthy and too analytical to be quoted; although it is not without interest, as showing how powerless even the strongest partiality is to blind one who cares above all things for truth. The truth, no doubt, is that Juliet Morant, despite many admirable qualities, was essentially shallow, and Leonard, himself so tragically profound, seems to have realised this. Nevertheless, he could have been happy as her husband and could have made her happy. The pity of it was that he could now do nothing for her or for himself, save spend long hours in the little *salon* at Neuilly when he might have been somewhat more usefully occupied elsewhere.

For, although the "species of flirtation" alluded to in the above extract struck him as a thing of small importance, it was not so regarded by the amused and curious ladies and gentlemen who watched its rapid development, nor in truth could they be blamed for shrugging their shoulders and wondering what Lord Leonard was about. It developed with great rapidity and without so much as a decent show of secrecy; it was carried on under the very

noses of hospitable friends, who would perhaps have curtailed their hospitality had one of the delinquents been of lower rank; it was paraded by Archie, who had nothing to lose, and exulted in by Lily, who, it may be, imagined herself the heroine of a victory. Selfish people are not always such very good hands at taking care of themselves; selfishness, pushed to the extreme, means inability to resist the gratification of any desire, and it has already been said that if Lady Leonard had ever been enamoured of a human being in her life, that favoured individual was Archie Morant. So she played with him and tantalised him to her heart's content, being in her turn tantalised by him (for he was infinitely better versed in the game than she was) until her amiable wish to give Juliet a slap in the face was replaced by determination to finally subjugate a lover who sometimes hinted that invincible obduracy might drive him to seek oblivion in other quarters. The verdict pronounced upon the pair in the cosmopolitan circles which they frequented was that they were behaving quite shockingly; but opportunities of continuing to do so were nevertheless granted to them with a fine liberality. That, after all, is only what, under such circumstances, is apt to happen in all circles.

"A lot of us are going down to Fontainebleau to-morrow for a couple of days," Lady Leonard casually announced to her husband one evening. "I was told to invite you; but I suppose you aren't very keen about joining us."

"I would rather be excused, unless I am wanted, which does not seem likely," he answered, adding presently—more for the sake of saying something than because he really wanted to know—"Of whom does your party consist?"

"I hardly remember. Madame de Visieux and some of her American hangers-on, the de Lianoffs and Mr. Morant. I forget who else."

She brought out Morant's name in a slightly defiant tone, accompanied by a slightly defiant glance; for she did not know how much her taciturn lord might or might not have heard, and she was a little, though not

very seriously, afraid of him. But Leonard had no observation to make, except, "That sounds as if I could be dispensed with."

"Oh, Fontainebleau can dispense with you; Neuilly, perhaps, can't."

Leonard did not feel called upon to take up that impertinent challenge. He did not, for the time being, feel called upon to interfere in any way with his wife, whom, as we have seen, he credited with a rather clearer appreciation of her own interests than she had recently manifested. When Archie called for her on the following day, and when they drove off to the Lyons station together, his sensation was one of sheer relief. Lily, he felt pretty sure, was not the woman to make a downright fool of herself, and how intolerable even the little that he had to bear of her company had become to him he only realised on being temporarily delivered from it.

But, on the morning after that, it gave him something of a shock to encounter in the rue de la Paix Madame de Visieux, a lively American lady, married to a Frenchman, whose acquaintance he had lately made. Fortunately for him, she spoke before he had time to commit an irreparable blunder.

"Good morning, Lord Leonard," said she cheerily. "Isn't it too bad that our Fontainebleau expedition should have fallen through! It would have been just lovely down there in this weather, and it will take me quite a long time to forgive Marie de Lianoff for spoiling everything by a fit of neuralgia."

He had the presence of mind to reply, "My sympathies are with Madame de Lianoff, who, I am sure, would prefer Fontainebleau to neuralgia. I should prefer it myself, though I am not an enthusiastic lover of excursions."

Madame de Visieux, who was no longer in her first youth and who was a shrewd, kindly little person, surveyed him for a moment, as though in doubt whether to risk an indiscretion or not; but, after the habit of her nation, she concluded to risk it.

"If I were you, Lord Leonard," she said drily, "I believe I would try to cultivate a love for them. Lady Leon-

ard enjoys excursions, you see—and so do other people. Some of the other people are pretty apt to notice your absence and make remarks about it.”

Leonard thanked her for her well-meant hint, which he appeared to take in good part, if a little stiffly. What struck him (for he knew that he passed for being somewhat formidable) was that things must have gone rather far before Madame de Visieux had decided upon volunteering such a warning. But indeed it was now startlingly evident that things had gone about as far as they could go, and any encouragement that past supineness on his part might have given to the gossips sank into insignificance by comparison with the portentous fact that Lily and Archie Morant had for the last twenty-four hours or so given no account of themselves.

He took leave of the American lady and returned to his hotel, revolving many thoughts in his mind as he walked. In confiding the episodes of the day to his journal, he candidly acknowledges that the prospect of emancipation to which he seemed, upon the face of it, destined was not unwelcome to him. To be rid of Lily for ever, at no matter what price!—it was an alluring vision, and he owns to having for some minutes luxuriated in it. But what about Juliet, who still loved her scapegrace of a husband? And again, what about Lily herself, to whom, when all was said, he owed the protection which every man owes to his wife and which his conscience told him that he had of late too ostentatiously withdrawn from her? It may have been rather on Juliet's account than on hers that he recognised the necessity of taking prompt action; but at any rate he did recognise it. The only question was what in the world it behoved him to do. To take the next train for Fontainebleau, he supposed; although there seemed to be no particular reason for anticipating that he would find the fugitives there on his arrival.

There was, at all events, nothing more practical or more harmless than that to be done, and accordingly, in something less than an hour, he was speeding southwards, a little perturbed, a little excited, altogether puzzled. It would, he could not help feeling, be so very unlike Lily to

run away with an impoverished married man, so very unlike Archie to bind himself openly and irrevocably to a woman who had little to offer him beyond the physical charms in which he had perhaps found a fugitive attraction. Yet the fact remained that they had left Paris together on the previous day and had not returned. How could they hope to explain it away?

It was, in truth, with scarcely any expectation that they would attempt to explain it away or would give him the chance of inviting them to do so that he stepped out of the train, on reaching the forest-encircled little town which has been the scene of Heaven only knows how many lovers' meetings, and had himself driven to the hotel chiefly frequented by the well-to-do. He was, therefore, in no wise surprised to learn that Lady Leonard's name did not figure amongst those of the travellers staying in that establishment. Ah, yes; her ladyship had been expected, the civil-spoken clerk in the *bureau* informed him; rooms had been prepared for her and for several other ladies and gentlemen on the preceding day. But countermanding instructions had been received by telegram; there had been, it appeared, some misunderstanding, and only two members of a proposed large party, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, had arrived. They were even now finishing their *déjeuner* in the salon which they had retained, if Monsieur was of their acquaintance and would wish to be announced to them.

Monsieur, never having heard of Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, was neither anxious nor entitled to intrude upon their privacy, and he intimated as much. It was only as an afterthought that he decided to say: "I am Lord Leonard. If this lady and gentleman belong, as I understand you to imply that they do, to Madame de Visieux's party, they may possibly be able to tell me whether my wife, whom I thought I should meet here, is in Fontainebleau or not."

"But without doubt!" the urbane clerk replied. Might he have the honour to send up his lordship's card?

Leonard had forgotten to bring any cards with him. He said he would take the liberty of going straight up to

Mr. Robinson's sitting-room, if somebody would be so good as to show him where it was, and, no objection being raised, he was at once conducted thither. All he wanted was to satisfy himself—for the sake of neglecting no precautionary formality—that Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were total strangers to him; he did not really propose to question them with regard to his wife's whereabouts, nor did he anticipate the discovery of Lily and Archie Morant, masquerading under a somewhat farcical pseudonym.

That, however, was the discovery that he made, on being ushered into a small first-floor room where two persons were contentedly sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes, with a dessert-covered table between them. There they impudently and astoundingly were, and it must be said for them that the entrance of the interrogative husband caused them for one moment to look as foolish as could be wished. Only for a moment, though. Lily's strident laugh did not delay to make itself heard, while she cried:

"This is a compliment! The idea of your anxiety having brought you down from Paris to lay violent hands upon me!"

She was a little frightened, despite her bravado. Leonard perceived that and smiled. "You need not," he answered, "be afraid of my using any violence towards you. At the same time, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"To say for myself?" she returned, still laughing. "Why, simply that it wasn't my fault if other people failed to keep their appointment yesterday, while I kept mine."

"You were informed by Madame de Visieux that the expedition had been given up, I presume."

"You are to presume no such thing, my dear Leonard. Sit down and smoke a cigarette, and don't scowl at me in that melodramatic way, please. Of course I didn't know that it had been given up. Was it given up? Mr. Morant and I came down in the train which was to have brought us all, and we expected our friends to arrive by the next, or the next, or the next. As they didn't, what

were we to do but to make the best of one another's company?"

"I should have thought you might have done what you are going to do now and return to Paris. Let me suggest that you should at once make preparations to accompany me on that journey. It is just possible that I may be able to save your reputation, provided that I care to save it; but you will not, I am sure, expect me to listen any longer to statements which convey so very unflattering an estimate of my intelligence. Be so good as to go to your bedroom and get ready; I can allow you a little more than half an hour."

She surveyed his pale, stern, contemptuous face, had the air of intending to defy him, then wavered and finally jumped up, with a jerk of her shoulders. "All right," said she; "have it your own way, then, if you are determined to make mountains out of molehills. As for my reputation, it isn't so very much more compromised than yours, perhaps." She walked towards the door, paused upon the threshold, and added, half-apprehensively, half-mockingly, "Now, don't quarrel, you two! There really isn't anything worth quarrelling about, you know."

Possibly not; yet, under certain circumstances, a man must needs behave as though he thought there was, and, however complete may have been the disdain which Leonard felt for the woman who bore his name, he had had to accept the consequences of her bearing it. As soon as the door had closed behind her, he advanced towards Morant, who remained seated, and said, "Well?"

Archie dropped the end of his cigarette into the finger-bowl at his elbow and returned coolly, "Well, it's awkward, I admit." And then, after a short pause, "I say, are we going to have a row?"

"Yes, I should think so. You won't, of course, waste time by pretending that you came down here in ignorance of the fact that Madame de Visieux's expedition had been abandoned."

"Lady Leonard has just told you that we did. I beg to confirm Lady Leonard's assertion."

"You can do no less, I suppose; I need scarcely tell you

that I don't believe it. Have you any explanation to offer of your having described yourself and my wife in the visitors' book as Mr. and Mrs. Robinson?"

"An obvious and unavoidable measure of precaution, my dear fellow! Would you have had us spend the night here under our real names?"

"Perhaps not, if you intended to spend the night here. But all this is absurd, and I don't know why I should put questions to you. Briefly, it comes to this, Morant. For your wife's sake, I may—I don't say that I shall—try to keep this affair secret; but I cannot swallow such a gross affront as you have put upon me—and that is why I am going to give you a thrashing."

Archie stood up, cool, good-humoured, broad-shouldered and muscular, if a trifle fleshy. "Are you quite sure that you can?" he asked.

"I am quite sure that I shall do my best," answered the other, taking off his coat.

Archie did not imitate him. He laid his hand on Leonard's shoulder and said:

"Look here, old man. I may be this, that or the other, but I take it that you know I am not a coward. I make no admissions whatsoever, mind; our case is that we stayed here, believing that each train would bring the rest of the party, until it was too late to think of returning and that then, as a *pis-aller*, we decided to adopt an *alias*. You don't accept that story. Very well; I am ready to give you any satisfaction that you may consider your due; only I really think that if we come to fisticuffs in a French provincial hotel, you will be sorry for it afterwards. The sole result would be to cover us both with ridicule and to advertise what you may feel, upon reflection, that it would have been wiser not to advertise."

"A duel, then?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. The thing can be managed with very little fuss and without, I hope, any publicity. Fortunately, we are in France. Just now you were kind enough to call me a liar. Very well; to-morrow I shall send you a brace of solemn asses, whom I am sure you will be able to match easily enough from amongst your

French acquaintances, and all details may be left to them. We aren't bound to proclaim to the world at large why we are fighting, don't you see?"

Leonard replied by an acquiescent gesture. The prospect of being shot or run through the body by an adversary who merited nothing but condign, ignominious chastisement might not be wholly alluring; still he could not but acknowledge that it was preferable to that of a tavern brawl. So he put on his coat again.

"And now," Archie resumed, in a tone of bland, kindly patronage which nobody with the faintest sense of humour could resent, "what we have to do is to get decently out of this. If you will be advised by me, you will walk up to the station, and let Mr. and Mrs. Robinson follow you as soon as their traps are packed. Lord and Lady Leonard will then take the train for Paris, while I, of course, shall either remain on the platform or slip quietly into another compartment. In that way scandal will be avoided."

This programme was in the sequel carried into effect. "It was really comic," Leonard writes, recounting the events of the day in his diary, "and how we managed to keep our countenances I don't know. But we did keep them, and, undignified as my part in the farce was, I am by no means sure that theirs was not even more so. At any rate, I did not feel bound to talk, whereas they did—which put them at a certain disadvantage. My wife, I believe, was in terror of her life, and would have given a good deal to escape being left alone with me in a *coupé*; but Morant perhaps found means of reassuring her. During the whole of the two hours' transit to Paris I addressed no single word to her, nor did she once venture to speak to me."

CHAPTER XV

Conventional Consequences

ON arriving at the Paris hotel, escorted by her silent husband, Lady Leonard went straight to bed, alleging an indisposition which, by reason of its convenience, he was very willing to accept as authentic. She paused for a moment before retiring to her room, as though in anticipation of some pronouncement from him; but, since he vouchsafed none, she left him to his reflections, which were curiously perplexed and undecided.

Of his wife's guilt he had not the shadow of a doubt; belief in her innocence was excluded by ascertained facts. He had likewise little or no doubt of his ability to obtain a divorce, should he desire one, upon the evidence that he could produce. But did he desire to be divorced from this woman, as to whose character he had long been without the vestige of an illusion, and who, if she had not hitherto brought overt disgrace upon his name, had subjected him to humiliations which overt disgrace could scarcely augment? For his own sake, of course he did, and if he had only had himself to think about, his course would have been clear; but in the whole of this ignoble, impudent, commonplace affair the one person who seemed to him to signify and to be worth considering was Juliet. The only question was whether she would be as glad as he to be freed from legal bondage, and the more he pondered over that question the less easy he found it to answer. Her enfranchisement appeared to be an almost necessary result of the publicity which must attend his own; for she could hardly continue to live with a man who had treated her as Archie would be proved to have done. Or would she, perhaps, insist upon continuing to live with him—and

anathematise the so-called friend who had placed an additional load of shame upon her shoulders? Such action on her part was not, Leonard felt, in the least impossible. Vaguely, momentarily, dismissed as soon as conceived, there floated before his eyes the imaginable future union of two happily divorced persons; but he had scruples, religious and other. Besides, if there was anything absolutely certain, it was that Juliet did not love and had never loved him.

He arrived at no fixed conclusion that night, and had arrived at none on the next morning, when he judged that the time had come for him to have a few words with Lily. She received him, conformably with the request transmitted to her, sitting up in bed, becomingly arrayed in cambric, lace and pale blue ribbons, and, although she did not open her lips, she had so much the air of saying, like Agag, "Surely the bitterness of death is past," that he responded, without waiting for her to speak:

"Well, I haven't made up my mind yet; I decline to commit myself. It would save time and simplify matters if you were to tell me the plain, unvarnished truth."

"Exactly what I have done, my dear Leonard," she coolly declared.

"Oh, no; you certainly can't have done that. Either you or Morant must of course have had some message from Madame de Visieux, and all I want to get at is your object in incurring what you can't have helped knowing was a very serious danger. Did you really mean to return here to-day and trust to my never finding out that the expedition had not taken place? Or were you mad enough to imagine that any human being would swallow such a story as you told me yesterday?"

Lily made a grimace. "Swallow it or choke over it, as you please," she answered, with almost sublime impertinence; "you will get no other story from me, I can tell you that. After all, what difference does it make to you, so long as appearances are saved? You won't, I am sure, flatter me to the extent of being jealous of Mr. Morant or of anybody else."

"No; but I have a certain old-fashioned jealousy for the honour of my name. You realise, no doubt, that you have rendered yourself liable to be divorced."

"Well, I realise that you might sue for a divorce, if you were anxious to wash dirty linen in public; I am far from being convinced that you would get one. You discovered me in a compromising situation, it is true; but we have our explanation of that cut and dried. Also it is in my power to show that you yourself are not altogether immaculate. If you haven't yet stayed a night at Neuilly, you have spent hours and hours there in Juliet's company, and everybody knows that you have ostentatiously neglected me of late. Oh, you won't go into court with clean hands, I assure you, and, if you will be advised by me, you won't go into court at all. Come!—all things considered, hadn't we better cry quits and hold our tongues?"

Leonard surveyed his wife silently. It was evident that she was no longer afraid; it was evident that his demand for a conference had reassured her, and that she knew very well by what threat he was likely to be reduced to inaction.

"You are a singularly shameless woman," he remarked.

"I can't say that I feel particularly ashamed of myself; I don't see why I should. If you had the slightest affection or regard for me, it might be different; but as you abandoned all pretence of that some time ago, the question seems to resolve itself into one of mere expediency."

He was quite unable to contradict her. The question, in its actual phase, was in truth what she had proclaimed it to be, and after what fashion it might be most expediently dealt with was for a third person to determine. Already he foresaw—as doubtless she likewise foresaw—that divorce proceedings would never be initiated and that, for the sake of that third person, dirt would probably have to be eaten.

Without another word, he left the room and betook himself to the adjoining *salon*, where two gentlemen in frock-coats, who had been for some minutes awaiting his pleasure, received him, bowing low and gravely. He had

clean forgotten the episode of which they were the obvious outcome; but the sight of them recalled to him the memory of his obligations, and by the time that they had introduced themselves and had stated their errand, his answer was ready.

"Oh, yes; it is the case that I used an insulting expression to Mr. Morant. I called him a liar, and I do not withdraw the assertion. As a matter of fact, he is a liar. You wish me, I suppose, to refer you to a couple of friends of mine."

They intimated that that would be the regular course to pursue, and, after a moment of reflection, he named two French friends of his with whom he undertook to place himself in prompt communication. It was all perfectly simple and, to his Britannic sense, somewhat ridiculous. As an Englishman, he might perhaps decline to exchange shots with another Englishman, whom he would have dearly loved to chastise, yet had no desire to slay; but there seemed to be advantages connected with adopting the customs of the country. It would hardly do for him, he thought, to accept the part of a *mari complaisant*, even though he might, and in the sequel most likely would, have to pocket the least pardonable of affronts. What caused him to laugh, thereby drawing a serious, interrogative glance from his interlocutors, was his realisation of Archie Morant's considerate thoughtfulness. His honour (should there ever come to be any public question of that) would be vindicated by the impending tragi-comic encounter, which might or might not be due to the pretext alleged; nobody would be necessarily compromised; while the chief offender would, in any event, be held to have demanded himself as a gallant man. Oh, it was clear that Archie understood very well what he was about!

In the course of the afternoon he saw M. de Romorin and M. de Monteray, an experienced and unexceptionable pair who willingly consented to act for him and who received his instructions without any indiscreet inquiry as to details. Understanding from him that he had no apology to offer to the gravely offended Mr. Morant, they had

only, they observed, to exercise functions of a formal character and they anticipated no difficulty in the discussion of preliminaries. They regretted to hear that he was no fencer, since the choice of weapons must be conceded to his adversary; but possibly pistols would be selected. He might, at all events, rely upon them to do the best that they could for him.

"I rely upon you without reserve and with many thanks," he smilingly assured them: "I am persuaded that I am safe in your hands and that you will do the proper thing, whatever that may be. My sole personal wish, if I may be permitted to express one, is that the affair should be got through at the earliest possible moment."

Compliance with this not unnatural wish proved manageable, and on the next day but one, at a very early hour of the morning, Leonard was driving briskly away from Paris in a landau, accompanied by his seconds and a stout, jovial surgeon, who nursed a long black-leather bag upon his knees. The pages of his diary, which furnish a sufficiently graphic account of what followed, may as well be laid under contribution here.

"It was a deliciously fresh, clear morning," he writes, "and my friends had the appearance of demurely enjoying it, although of course the special charm which it had for me, as being possibly the last that I should ever see, was lacking to them. They took me, I believe, for a determined fire-eater, and must no doubt have had their suspicions as to the true cause of a quarrel respecting which they had remained throughout commendably mute. I was neither frightened, nor nervous, nor cold, nor anything, except rather uncomfortably conscious of the irony and the supreme absurdity of the whole thing. All duels, it seems to me, are bound to be absurd, unless they are to be very serious indeed, and this one had from the outset presented such a meagre show of seriousness! My adversary, who had arranged everything to suit himself, could not, I felt pretty sure, desire to incur the great inconvenience of killing me; naturally, I did not propose to make an end of him, and I was sorry that we were to

fight with pistols, for it really looked as though we might both be reduced to the crowning farce of firing in the air. However, there was some comfort in the thought that the thing would soon be over, and that neither Lily—still confined to her bedroom in the best of health and a prey to burning, suppressed curiosity—nor Juliet, from whom I had heard no word, was on the scent of a combat at once so preposterous and so unavoidable.

“On reaching the wood of Vincennes, whither we were bound, we left our carriage at a restaurant and proceeded on foot to a charming grassy glade, hemmed in by trees on all sides, where the opposing party already awaited us. There was some flourishing of hats, a murmured colloquy which did not last long; then de Romorin, after whispering to me to button up my coat, placed the lethal implement in my hand, fell back quickly, and then—lo and behold! there was Morant facing me at a distance which seemed to me so short as to preclude the possibility of our missing one another, save of set purpose. The instant during which I felt that this was too grotesque was followed by the thought, equally instantaneous, that perhaps, after all, it might not be grotesque—might be real and intended—in which case I was assuredly to all intents and purposes a dead man. Little as I am enamoured of life, I should be sorry to swear that I had not a flash of fear, or of something like it. But I took steady aim at the trunk of a tree well to the right of my human mark; the signal was given; two simultaneous reports rang out, and I became aware that I was unscathed. I was wondering (for I had forgotten to make any inquiry upon the subject) whether a further interchange of powder and shot would be required of us or not when, to my utter amazement, I saw Morant’s seconds hurry forward, catch him in their arms and lower him to the ground, the doctors joining them in apparent consternation. It was evident that by some miracle of bad marksmanship on my part he had been hit!

“To whom but me, the most unlucky man on the face of the earth, I do believe, would or could such an atrocious mischance have happened! Even now, when I know that,

instead of shooting him through the heart (as of course I might have done) I had simply put a bullet into his left shoulder, inflicting a nasty, but not a dangerous, wound, the memory of the few ensuing minutes turns me sick and cold. What are our real feelings? What are the actual affections, resentments, desires which lie deep down beneath the ruffled surface of our natures, unsuspected by ourselves until some swift catastrophe reveals them to us? My deliberate opinion of Morant was that he was a worthless cur, a cur so worthless that one could hardly condescend even to be angry with him. He had lied to me, deceived me, supplanted me; he had robbed me of the woman whom I loved, only to neglect and insult her; not content with that, he had brought disgrace upon the name which I was compelled to share with a person as worthless as he. Yet at that moment I not only forgave him, but all that he had done appeared quite superficial, quite irrelevant. On a sudden he became to me once more my dear old chum of far-away cadet days, whom I had loved and admired beyond everybody in the world, and who now lay prone upon the grass there, slain, as it seemed, by my accursed hand!

"Well, of course he was not slain, merely faint from the pain of a shattered bone, and the mood passed. I record its passage because one would fain see and understand things as they are, and because it is, after all, remarkable that conscientious study of one's own nature and other people's should result in misapprehensions so fundamental. I cannot recall exactly what took place; but everything leads me to believe that I made a fool of myself and incurred the surprised displeasure of my correct seconds. De Romorin, I know, remonstrated mildly with me as we walked off, after being reassured by the surgeons and by the wounded man himself. Emotion, de Romorin remarked, was under all the circumstances out of place.

"I daresay it was; I daresay that emotion of the kind which I had probably displayed struck my friends as exaggerated and as somewhat inexplicable into the bargain. They admitted, however, that a wound of which the con-

sequences could not yet be accurately predicted was a matter for regret. It would, they feared, entail some measure of that publicity which I had deprecated all along; for, although I might depend upon their holding their tongues, a man must needs account somehow or other for being sent to bed in a disabled condition. Besides, there were the coachman and the doctors and the people at the restaurant, any one of whom might be easily prevailed upon to supply information to inquisitive journalists. At the bottom of their hearts they must have believed, I suppose, that I had aimed at Archie's, and that my remorse was either insincere or a little contemptible.

"We breakfasted at the restaurant—one of us had a poorish appetite—while preparations were being made to transport my fallen foe as comfortably as might be to his domicile. I should have liked to lend a hand in these; but it was intimated to me that such officious behaviour would be altogether at variance with propriety. Moreover, I was already sensible of a certain inevitable reaction. A flesh wound (had it been but a flesh wound!) was, to be sure, the very least that Morant had deserved, and if he was under the impression that it had been purposely inflicted—well, why should he not be under that impression? It was unfortunate, of course, that the bone had been touched; but I could hardly expect him to believe that I considered this a misfortune, nor was it likely that he would thank me for fussing round him with offers of unneeded assistance. So when we had seen his improvised ambulance driven off at a foot's pace, and when we had lingered a while over coffee and cigarettes, we returned to Paris, where I was in due course deposited at the door of my hotel, which I did not enter.

"I did not enter, because it seemed just possible that my wife might have got wind of my unwontedly matutinal disappearance and that I might be asked questions which it would be difficult for me to answer. Another twenty-four hours, I thought, would probably furnish me with a reply to some of these and would render the rest superfluous; for, after the remarks which had fallen from

my friends, I could scarcely hope that the event of the morning would remain a secret. So I went to the Embassy, where sundry documents which I wished to examine had been kindly prepared for my inspection, and it was not until five o'clock that I returned home, to find Madame de Visieux drinking tea and engaged in animated conversation with Lily.

"Madame de Visieux, as her first words told me, knew nothing about anything—which was so far satisfactory. She had come, she said, to arrange for the carrying out of the postponed Fontainebleau jaunt at an early date, and she pointedly hoped that I should be able this time to form one of the party. I replied that it was, unfortunately, impossible either for Lady Leonard or for myself to make any definite engagement, since we might from one moment to another have to leave for London; an announcement which it struck me that our kindly American friend heard with less regret than politeness compelled her to express. Incidentally I found out that telegrams, warning them of Madame Lianoff's indisposition, had been despatched in due time both to my wife and to Morant, and I suspect that this revelation gave Lily a rather uncomfortable five minutes. I suppose, however, that my abstention from any comment upon it set her mind at ease; for no sooner had our visitor departed than she coolly remarked, 'I never had that telegram, you know.'

"Not thinking that her statement called for a rejoinder, I made none, and presently she swept off into her bedroom, throwing at me over her shoulder as she went one of those singularly impudent, defiant glances of which she has been prodigal these last few days. They would doubtless have the effect of a slap in the face, if one were not, happily or unhappily, invulnerable to assaults from that quarter. It can be proved, I imagine, that the telegram was delivered; but whether I shall seek for or employ the required evidence is another matter. To-morrow morning's post ought, I should think, to give me a lead. If it does not, the only thing left for me to do will be to go out to Neuilly and frankly request instructions."

CHAPTER XVI

Leonard Shrugs his Shoulders

AMONGST Leonard's letters on the following morning was, as he had anticipated would be the case, one in a handwriting with which he was well acquainted, and its contents also proved to be very much what he had expected that they would be.

"Will you come and see me?" Juliet wrote. "I am dreadfully distressed about what has happened, and I don't at all know how you feel—whether you will think this an extraordinary request or not. But it does seem to me that worse things may follow unless we can manage, between us, to avert them; so that must be my excuse. Archie himself is anxious that we should meet and talk it all over. He is going on well; though the doctors say that we cannot be quite free from anxiety for some days to come. I shall be at home all to-morrow afternoon, and there is no reason why you should not call, if you are generously willing to do so. The servants and several inquirers have been told of a riding accident, which seems to be believed in."

Leonard laughed slightly as he folded up this artless missive, which, despite its brevity, told him all that there was any need for him to know. Obviously, Juliet had been informed of everything, had condoned everything, was eager to hush everything up: it only remained for him to assure her that she might count upon his connivance, and that soothing intimation could at once be transmitted by messenger or telegram. However, since she said that there was no reason why he should not call, and since he saw no reason for denying himself the bitter-sweet satisfaction of a colloquy with her, he decided to respond to

her summons in person. After all, he owed her an apology, perhaps, while the fact of his having paid a visit of sympathy to Neuilly would probably tend more than anything else to throw discredit upon rumours which were pretty sure to be promulgated.

Early in the afternoon, therefore, he betook himself to the villa, was informed, in answer to the solicitous query which he was careful not to omit, that Mr. Morant's condition continued favourable, and was shown into the shabby little *salon* where he had so often been made welcome of late. The windows were flung wide open, the torn lace curtains fluttering in the breeze; the grass-plot outside was flooded with sunshine; birds were singing in the surrounding shrubs, and directly overhead, where no doubt the sufferer lay, could be heard the quick passing to and fro of light footsteps. Leonard sat waiting, his long face twisted into a faint, ironical smile. Well, he thought, the situation was at least original, if it could not be called precisely flattering to his self-esteem, and he was sensible of some degree of curiosity as to its development. Its final issue, was, of course, a foregone conclusion. Presently Juliet came in, with shining eyes—a trifle flushed, a trifle apprehensive and interrogative, yet visibly grateful.

"This is more than good of you!" she exclaimed.

"I don't know why you should say that," was Leonard's reply, as he rose and took her outstretched hand. "How can you tell that I am going to be good?"

Her countenance answered that she devoutly hoped and ventured to believe he was; but she only said: "It is good of you, at any rate, to have come at all."

"Oh, as for that," he returned, "do I ever fail to come when you call me?" And, as she made no rejoinder, he added, "Or ever fail to do what you ask me to do?"

"You have always been a much better friend to me than I have to you," Juliet confessed, "and I have never deserved your friendship. But—I don't think I have ever before asked you to do anything very difficult or disagreeable, have I?"

"It would have made no difference if you had. What

you are about to ask me to do now will be a little difficult and distinctly disagreeable, I suppose; yet I am not sure that it wouldn't have had to be done in any case. So many disagreeable things seem to be practically unavoidable. This serio-comic duel, for instance. I really did not see my way to escape from it, and how could I guess that the only infallible method of missing my antagonist was to point my pistol straight at him? I shall know better in future."

Juliet looked puzzled; Leonard, in some of his moods, had always perplexed her. "You did not mean to hit him, then?" she asked.

"Good Heavens, no! Do you take me for a murderer? There was a hideous moment during which I took myself for an involuntary one, and I have so little wish to incur that sensation a second time that I doubt whether I shall ever fight another duel. There are, after all—in England, at least—alternative means of vindicating one's tarnished honour."

"But you won't resort to them?" she said quickly.

At this he laughed aloud. "Oh, not on the present occasion. Haven't I said that I am at your orders?—and could I doubt, after receiving your note this morning, what those orders would be? You wished, you told me, to avert worse things than have befallen you. Well, from the moment that you consider them worse, they become worse and must be averted. Your husband also, I gather, is anxious to avert them and authorises you to enter upon peace negotiations. His magnanimity really knows no bounds!"

"You have a right to speak bitterly," Juliet acknowledged, a wave of colour overspreading her cheeks. "Yet—there are excuses for him."

"There are always excuses for everybody, perhaps. Even for me, when I am unmanly enough to take pleasure in hurting you. But that isn't a real pleasure to me—I think you must know it isn't—and I won't indulge in it any more. Let it be agreed, then, that I shall adopt no steps to punish my wife—for whom also excuses might possibly be found, if it were worth while to undertake the

search—and that I shall pretend to accept her story and your husband's of their joint escapade."

"Well," answered Juliet slowly, "don't you think that, upon the whole, that will be the best plan?"

"I think whatever you think. Of course their story is incredible upon the face of it and can be proved with the greatest ease in the world to be false. Still, nobody can absolutely force us to open our eyes, so long as we choose to keep them shut, and let us hope that nobody will try. The only question is whether you are really consulting your future happiness by allowing such an opportunity as this to slip through your fingers. Have you considered what your husband is, what he will be to the end of his days, and what further humiliations you will almost certainly be called upon to endure?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, smiling faintly, "I have considered all that. But there are other considerations; my boy's future; for one. It must always be a disadvantage to be the son of divorced or separated parents. Besides, the feeling that I have about Archie—but you would never understand it!"

"I understand it so well that I suspect I must have experienced something very like it myself when I was under the impression that I had shot him. All the same, I cannot think it a very wise or reasonable feeling."

"I don't pretend to be wise; I only know that, if I were to desert him, he would go altogether to the bad. Then, too—will you laugh at me for saying so, I wonder?—it is almost impossible to help forgiving him. He is always sorry—quite genuinely sorry."

"When he is found out, you mean? Yes; that is very human of him. Added to which, as you say, he is never without the excuse of temptation."

"I do think that he might fairly put forward that excuse in the present instance," Juliet declared; "I do think that it was made extremely difficult for him to avoid behaving as he behaved."

Had he told her so, then? The plea was scarcely a chivalrous one; but chivalry, as displayed towards Lily, would, to be sure, be something of an absurdity. Leon-

ard shrugged his shoulders and observed drily, "That may be."

There was an interval of silence, after which Juliet resumed: "I hope you don't think that I underestimate your generosity?"

"I don't know," he answered, "that I am entitled to set up for being generous. I should like—plainly speaking—to be rid of the companionship of Lady Leonard; but, on the other hand, I should very much dislike the degrading ordeal of cross-examination in the Divorce Court, and I am not compelled to swallow Lady Leonard's companionship in large doses. No; you need not feel that you are under any special obligation to me. It is literally and strictly true that I have no wishes in this matter except your wishes."

The strict and literal truth, which it had ever been his aim to cultivate, was what he affirmed it to be. Other truths forced themselves upon him ere he took his leave, and saddened his already sufficiently sad heart. The sole service that he could render to the woman whom he had once loved, and indeed still loved, was to abandon her to her fate—a fate with which she was not, after all, seriously dissatisfied. The question of what was ultimately to become of him and his impossible consort evidently did not interest her; although he was given to understand that the removal of the latter from Paris would be a welcome measure.

"Well," he said at length, when he rose, "I suppose we shall meet no more in this world."

Juliet sighed. "I hardly see how we can," she answered. "Our paths are not very likely to cross again, are they? And even if they should!"—

"Oh, it would be awkward, of course. I am sorry about that erratic shot of mine; I can only hope that it will not have grave results."

"I hope not; I think not. The doctors say that there are splinters of bone which will have to come away, and some permanent stiffness is not unlikely; still, up to the present all has gone well."

"Quite excellently," Leonard agreed; "and—accidents,

equestrian and other, will happen. Perhaps, upon the whole, we may consider ourselves a good deal indebted to the chapter of accidents."

"But I am not ungrateful," she anxiously insisted; "I fully realise that you might, if you had chosen, have given me infinite pain, which you have decided to spare me, and most men, I think, would have decided differently. What is so beautiful about you is that you are utterly unlike most men."

Of that somewhat dubious valedictory compliment he had to make the best that he could. It had a perceptible ring of unconscious, unintentional contempt which harmonised only too well with his own view of his conduct. For, whatever might be said about gratitude, it was really impossible to ignore the fact that he was humbling himself in the dust for the sake of one who cared uncommonly little about him. And now the distasteful task devolved upon him of intimating as much to one who cared even less. With her, however, he could be, and purposed to be, both peremptory and plain-spoken. She was going to escape the penalty that was her due, since there was no help for it; but she was not going to triumph. His acquaintance with feminine nature was so defective that he did not know how invariably and inevitably women triumph over those who, for no matter what reason, appear to knock under to them.

Lily, wrapped in a gorgeous tea-gown, was reclining upon the sofa when he returned to the hotel, with a novel in her hand; but at the sight of him she swung her feet to the ground, tossed her book away and exclaimed:

"If you knew how impatiently I have been waiting for you to turn up! What is all this I hear about Mr. Morant having had a fall from his horse and dislocated his shoulder?"

"He is said to have had a fall from his horse," Leonard answered; "but that is not true, nor is he suffering from a dislocated shoulder. As I think you had better know the truth, I will tell you that what is the matter with his shoulder is a bullet wound, inflicted by me yesterday morning."

"Inflicted by you?—how very improbable that sounds! I can imagine you doing all manner of eccentric things, Leonard; but I really can't see you avenging yourself with a revolver in the style of the Western States of America!"

"Your imagination is not required to undertake such flights. I am not an assassin, and Morant's wound was incurred on the field of honour, in compliance with traditional exigencies. I am not sure that I was bound to fight him; but, as he seemed to think that I had better, and as I myself had a feeling that some such formality ought to be gone through, I met him at Vincennes, with seconds, surgeons and all complete. The thing is not to be talked about, please; I presume that, for your own sake, you will abstain from talking about it. I have only to add that, although your version of the episode which led to our encounter is palpably false, I have made up my mind to behave as though it were true, and that we shall leave for London to-morrow."

Lady Leonard had some ado to restrain herself from rubbing her hands. Her exultant countenance betrayed the relief and satisfaction that she felt; but all she said was:

"In other words, you admit that you haven't a leg to stand upon. How splendidly Mr. Morant seems to have behaved!—and what a fool you seem to have made of yourself!"

"I might return that compliment," her husband quietly observed, "if I cared to dispute with you; but I don't. Let me, however, warn you that I am not in the least your dupe, and that you will not find me so pliant again. In this instance I have determined to spare you, for reasons of my own."

"Reasons of your own!" Lily returned, with a scornful laugh. "Reasons of somebody else's, you mean. You have just been consulting somebody else, haven't you?—and I daresay she has brought home to you the danger of throwing stones when you live in a glass house. You are not my dupe, you say. Well, I assure you that I am not yours, and I know you would joyfully shunt me to-morrow if you dared, or if you thought that you had a

chance of success. My compliments to Mrs. Morant the next time you see her; she has sense enough to realise that my shoes are neither vacant nor likely to be. I don't object to seeing her, you know."

Leonard had spoken the truth in saying that he did not care to dispute with his wife, and her insolence scarcely moved him. "It is not very probable," he answered, "that I shall ever see Mrs. Morant again, and of course you must not see her husband again. We shall go home, as I told you, to-morrow."

"Oh, rubbish! That would be just the way to make people talk; whereas what you and she want is to prevent people from talking. Personally, I am indifferent; my conscience is clear, and even if it were not, I should have nothing to fear from you. But to bolt out of the country now, dragging me at your heels, would be quite the stupidest thing that you could do. No; we will stay where we are for another week or ten days, if you please, and you will wind up your interesting researches at the Embassy, according to programme. I make this suggestion for your benefit and Juliet's, mind; I don't myself dread being accused of scandalous behaviour or of having forced you to fight a duel on my account. That sort of thing doesn't do a woman of my rank much harm nowadays."

A woman of her rank! Well, he had bestowed that rank upon her, and he was not prepared to deny that she accurately gauged some of its privileges. But why—considering that the motive which she assigned was obviously not genuine—should she wish to linger in Paris? He had the curiosity to inquire.

"Our staying here," he remarked, "would not enable you to see Morant, who is likely to be confined to his room for some time yet."

"Oh, I don't know," she coolly rejoined; "I might call to inquire, and I daresay I should be permitted to visit the invalid in his sick-room. That would be as good a means as another of disarming suspicion."

"Your assuming that I should sanction the employment

of such means," observed Leonard, "is rather instructive. For whom or for what, I wonder, do you take me?"

Lily laughed. "Don't press the question," she returned. "With every wish to keep the peace and to make things pleasant all round, I am afraid I should not be able to flatter you if I were to give you an honest answer. Forbid me, if you choose, to call at the house which you yourself haven't been too proud or too discreet to visit; I really don't care. I shall certainly write to Mr. Morant; you are welcome to that information. You, I imagine, will just as certainly write to Juliet and hear from her. Why shouldn't we agree to be mutually accommodating?"

"I despair," said Leonard, with a shrug of his shoulders, "of rendering myself intelligible to you; it would be a waste of time even to try. I think, however, that you will have to obey the few and simple orders which I must give you."

"The difference between us, my dear Leonard," she composedly replied, "is that I don't think so. You are too fond of blowing hot and cold; you don't quite know what you want, and if you did, the chances are that you wouldn't know how to secure it. To a certain extent I can sympathise with you, for I see how invidiously you are situated; but you don't, if you will excuse my saying so, inspire either awe or respect. So it strikes me that there will be no need to telegraph to the servants in Grosvenor Place."

She strolled smilingly out of the room, with the air of having said all that there was to say upon the subject, while Leonard, shrugging his shoulders once more, wrote out the telegram which she had pronounced unnecessary.

CHAPTER XVII

The Discarded Lily

SCARCELY had Leonard given orders to his servant to pack up in preparation for departure on the following morning when the First Secretary of the British Embassy was announced. This dapper gentleman, still comparatively young and evidently destined to arrive at prominence in his calling, came as the bearer of an invitation to meet at dinner a certain financial magnate of European celebrity, and he expressed his personal disappointment, which he was sure would be shared by his chief, on learning that Lord Leonard was about to quit the French capital.

"Kronenheller only arrives from Vienna at the end of the week," he said, "and you really ought not to miss him if you can help it. Half an hour's talk with him will give you more information than you will get by any amount of fagging at official papers. Couldn't you stretch a point and postpone your flitting?"

There was an implied compliment in the suggestion to which Leonard was not wholly insensible. At that time he had not yet realised, nor had others realised, that he was hopelessly unfitted for political life. On the contrary, he was disposed to hope that he might find in public affairs that object and that anodyne of which he stood so sorely in need, and although he had no authorised mission, he was aware that he could, if he liked, render services to the Government of the day which would probably receive ultimate recognition. For able and industrious young noblemen of territorial influence are seldom neglected by the Government of any day. Therefore he paused to reflect, and his visitor gave him further food for reflection by remarking:

"Nasty accident, this of Morant's. I suppose one must accept his story of a fall from his horse?"

"Does anybody doubt the truth of his story?" Leonard asked.

"Oh, Lord, yes! It is whispered—or rather more than whispered—that he was called out and wounded by an irate husband. There are several husbands in Paris who might, by all accounts, think that they had some reason for calling him out."

"I daresay there are. Is this one named?"

The diplomatist laughed. "Well, I have heard him named; but I am not going to repeat what I have heard. All lies most likely; only one is sorry for poor Mrs. Morant, who has stuck to her husband through thick and thin, and who might easily, I should think, be caused or spared a good deal of annoyance."

"In what way?"

"Oh, I don't know; I'm not acquainted with the facts. But if I had been Morant's assailant, and if I wanted to spare her, I believe I should try to lend her a hand by behaving as if nothing had happened. After all, one can't do more than fight a man and put a bullet in him; one doesn't want to be avenged upon his unoffending family. I remember once in the days of my youth getting into a row with a married man at St. Petersburg. I had to meet him, and I was lucky enough to run him through the arm. The affair was kept as dark as possible; but of course rumours leaked out, as they always do, and as I knew that his wife was very anxious to suppress them, I made a point of dancing with her three times in succession at a Court ball immediately afterwards. She was awfully grateful, and so was her husband. They send me pots of caviare at regular intervals to the present day. Of course, if I had cut them, or if I had hooked it out of the place on leave, as I might have done, people would have drawn their own conclusions."

This extremely broad hint, which may have been, and indeed probably was, dictated by sheer good nature, had its effect upon one who was far more eager to serve Mrs. Morant's interests than his own. He was, moreover, sin-

cerely desirous of conferring with Baron von Kronenheller, whose approaching advent seemed to justify the announcement of a change of plans to Lady Leonard. Lily, it is true, on being informed that she would not be required to leave for England immediately, laughed the Baron to scorn.

"Oh, I never thought that you really meant going," she calmly remarked, "and I don't know that I should have gone with you if you had. As it happens, I want to stay where I am a little longer; so I won't inquire into your motives, which, for the matter of that, don't interest me."

He allowed her defiance to pass. He did not see how she could very well compromise herself or others more than she had already done, nor did he think that there was any likelihood of her being permitted to see Morant, should she call, as it might be taken for granted that she would, to make inquiries at his door. He, for his part, despatched a messenger to Neuilly every morning during the days that followed, thinking that at once the best method of intimating to Juliet that he had been unable to comply with her wishes and of acting upon the diplomatic hint with which he had been favoured. He received in return satisfactory reports of Mr. Morant's progress, but no note or personal message. Going little into society and busied with the dry statistics for which he was cultivating a sort of forced enthusiasm, he did not hear, as his wife did, that everybody had got wind of the Vincennes affray and that nobody knew what to make of it. At a later period it was said of him that he must be either a fool or a cynic; but at the time most people inclined to the belief that he was astutely awaiting developments.

That these were not provided for him was no fault of Lily's, who wrote twice to her wounded admirer and whose missives, to her great surprise and indignation, were left unacknowledged. Had she known Archie a little better than she did, she would not have been surprised, although she might still have been excusably indignant: as it was, she suspected Juliet of intercepting his correspondence—a mode of carrying on hostilities to

which she was determined that she would in no wise tamely submit. One afternoon, accordingly, she drove out to Neuilly and asked for Mrs. Morant, into whose presence she was, after a short delay, shown.

"Well, my dear," she began, holding out her hand with an indescribable air of impudence and patronage, "how is your husband by this time?"

"Very much better, thank you," answered Juliet. "It is now certain, I am glad to say, that his accident will have no serious results—of any kind."

The two ladies surveyed one another as destined combatants of whatever species or sex are wont to do before fur and feathers begin to fly. Both were aware that there was going to be a scrimmage; but each was disposed to let the other strike the first blow. This honour was eventually accepted by Lady Leonard, who observed, with a short laugh:

"There isn't much use in talking about 'accidents,' you know."

"I did not know," the other quietly returned, "how much or how little you knew."

"Oh, I am fully informed! Anything more absurd I never heard of in my life; but I daresay you are all of you as ashamed of yourselves as you ought to be now. Whether you are or not, I don't mean to let this make the least difference between me and Mr. Morant."

"I do not think that you will be consulted about that," Juliet replied. "My husband sees, if you do not, that, after what has taken place and what has unfortunately been more or less made public, it would be out of the question for you and him to meet again."

"How much more that sounds like your decision than his, my dear! Don't you understand that we can't save appearances better than by meeting again? Or is it that you care less about appearances than about rescuing him from my dreaded clutches? You really need not be so much alarmed. I have handed him over to you once already, remember, and I should hardly have done that if I had been as eager as you evidently think I am to keep him all to myself. But he amuses me and I believe I

amuse him—you, I am afraid, don't—so we are naturally unwilling to drop one another."

"At the risk of being thought unmannerly," answered Juliet, to whom the woman's aspect was even more offensive than her words, "I must say that he is not only willing but anxious to drop you."

"I shall believe that," returned the other, with a laugh, "when I hear it from his own lips. Suppose, just by way of convincing me that you are speaking the truth, you were to let him know that I am here?"

"I think, if he were in the house, he would probably ask you to excuse him; but, as a matter of fact, he has gone out for a walk."

"That is another statement which I must take the liberty of disbelieving," Lily declared.

"In that case, Lady Leonard, there is really no more to be said. Of course it would not be worth my while to deceive you; for if my husband wanted to meet you again, it would be out of my power to prevent him from doing so, now that he is no longer confined to his room. But he does not wish it, and he will not voluntarily do it. That, indeed, was his message to you."

"His message! Do you assert that he gave you a message for me? As if he could possibly contemplate your having a chance to deliver it!"

"Well, I suppose his forecasts are based upon some knowledge and experience of precedents. I did not myself think that you would call; but he was sure that you would, and he instructed me to say what I have said. His words—but I won't repeat them all—were 'You will have to make her understand that the incident is closed.' Disagreeable as the incident has been to me, I have agreed to turn my back upon it, and"—

"And upon me too, eh?" interrupted Lily stormily. "Very well! I haven't, as you may imagine, the least wish ever to behold your face again, and I suppose you have contrived to scare Mr. Morant into promises of good behaviour. But if you think that he will keep them a day longer than I choose to let him, you don't know your man! What you will probably be glad to hear is that I have had

about enough of him. He is, after all, a poor-spirited sort of creature, and he doesn't exactly belong to my world. As I said a few minutes ago, I made you welcome to him when he was a bachelor; you are more than equally welcome to him now that he is your legal property. Only you will admit, perhaps, that I have shown you how very easy it would be to deprive you of your legal property."

Under cover of that somewhat feeble proclamation that the grapes were sour Lady Leonard marched out. It was all very well to say to herself that if Archie was poor-spirited, his wife was not less so, and that ample vengeance had been wrecked upon the amiable and superior Miss Vyse of an earlier day; but she was at heart deeply chagrined, recognising that what she had heard was the truth and that a fickle admirer wished to have no more to do with her. There is one point upon which even the vainest and most superficial of women can never cherish an illusion, and she knew well enough what had been the nature of Archie Morant's affection for her from the outset. So she drove back towards Paris with heavy clouds upon her brow and rage in her breast.

Now, it came to pass on that selfsame afternoon that Leonard, strolling pensively up the Champs Élysées and endeavouring to think about nothing but a studious comparison of hard facts and arid figures, was tapped gently on the shoulder by the very last person in the world whom he would have expected to accost him in so public a manner. He looked as much astonished as he felt on descrying Archie Morant's smiling countenance within a few inches of his own, and his astonishment was not lessened when Morant said:

"Don't scowl so savagely at a maimed man! Thanks to you, I still carry one arm in a sling, you see; so you can't with any decency lay your stick across my shoulders. Moreover, there is no reason why you should. There is no reason that I know of why we shouldn't be friends, and there wasn't much reason, if it comes to that, for your putting a bullet into me. I might have put one into you, you know; only of course I took jolly good care to fire wide."

"I have no doubt of it," Leonard answered. "Perhaps you will hardly believe that I meant to do likewise; yet I did. Nevertheless, I confess that I do not see how it is practicable for us to be friends. When you say that there is no reason why we shouldn't be, do you really wish me to understand that what you told me at Fontainebleau was the truth?"

Archie laughed. He had coolly passed his right arm through Leonard's left, and they were pacing slowly along beneath the trees, visible in that familiar posture to any friends or acquaintances who might chance to be on their way to or from the Bois. "Naturally," he replied, "I wish you to understand that Lady Leonard's statement, with which I had the honour to associate myself at the time, was accurate. But even if it had been false!"—

"I think it was false," said Leonard curtly.

"Well, what then? You have done all that you could be expected to do under the circumstances, and I must say that you have behaved like a thorough gentleman. It would have been easy for you—I won't say to divorce your wife, but at any rate to separate yourself from her, and I know why you held your hand. Not for my sake, you are going to protest. No; not for my sake, of course; still the fact remains that I am indebted to you, and I must be allowed to be grateful."

"Then show your gratitude by treating your wife better," Leonard returned.

"Exactly what I intend to do, my dear fellow. Heaven forgive me! I am always intending to turn over a new leaf; but these infernal women!—Ah, you don't sympathise; you aren't built that way. Juliet does; though she isn't built that way either. I say, Leonard, do you remember the old *Britannia* days? Do you remember what a fine fellow you used to think me then?"

"I remember it all well enough," answered Leonard sadly. "Why won't you let me think you a fine fellow still? Why have you forced me to think you a blackguard, Archie?"

The other jerked up his shoulders, without the least diminution of good humour. "Am I a blackguard?" he

meditatively asked. "I have done some queerish things, no doubt, and yet I believe I should have been right enough, upon the whole, if there had been no women in the world. Oh, I'm not denying the existence of decent women; Juliet is a bright and shining example, and I've met with one or two others in my time. But what I do maintain is that the majority of them aren't worth quarrelling about. Lady Leonard, saving your presence, isn't worth quarrelling about."

"Possibly not; but are you quite the right person to say that?"

"Oh, I'm speaking confidentially," Archie returned, with a laugh. "Besides, I have offended against you so much and so often that one little bit of bad taste, more or less, can't greatly matter. It may be bad taste, and I daresay it is, to tell you that old friendships ought not to be severed by such women as your wife; but at least it is true."

"Does it not strike you," Leonard asked, "that this is a very odd sort of conversation?"

"Yes; but it's the only sort that we can have, you and I. And I wanted you to know that I appreciate your generosity. Also that I am going to try to deserve it."

Leonard nodded silently. A little against his will, he retained an indomitable fondness for the hero of his boyhood, and he asked for nothing better than to believe that that fallen hero retained some of the instincts of a gentleman. Yet he could not help feeling that a gentleman would not have said what Archie had just said.

"After what has taken place, we can't very well be friends again, Morant," he remarked at length; "but I suppose we need not be enemies. We shall simply cease to see one another or hear of one another, that's all."

That was probably all that Archie wished. At any rate, he did not wish to see or hear any more of Lady Leonard, and an opportunity of displaying his rather ungallant sentiments towards the lady in question was provided for him when she, driving homewards from Neuilly, caught sight of the pair, stopped her carriage and beckoned imperatively to them to approach.

"Oh, hang it!" he audibly ejaculated. And then: "Well, good-bye, old man; I'm off."

He hastily raised his hat to her ladyship and suited the action to the word, while Leonard, drawing nearer to the arrested equipage, received full in his face a diatribe which would have been more fittingly addressed to the fugitive.

Is there any spectacle less edifying or more vicariously humiliating than that of a vulgar woman in a rage? Lily, who had lost her head (possibly also her heart, but it is difficult to tell how far such persons can be said to possess such organs), was so angry that she neither knew nor cared what she was saying, and, to cut short a scene which seemed likely to become intelligible even to those unacquainted with the English language, Leonard stepped into the carriage beside her, motioning to the coachman to drive on.

"She surpassed herself," his diary records; "she made, by implication, every admission that there was to make; she had uncomplimentary adjectives for us all, including Morant, whom she called a 'dirty coward,' I remember. Tears and sobs supervened, which were scarcely disguised, notwithstanding my remonstrances and representations, as we rolled along the rue de Rivoli, raked by I know not how many pairs of inquisitive eyes. But the upshot was a virtual acknowledgment of defeat on her part, and we are to start for London to-morrow. She is 'dead sick' of Paris, she declares, and, luckily for her, the remedy is obvious. Would that the rest of us could with equal ease dismiss things and people when we have grown dead sick of them!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. Leonard's Hopes,

MRS. LEONARD, after the rupture which entailed permanent exile from her son's roof, established herself in South Kensington, where her means enabled her to rent a commodious house and where she devoted the superabundance of her spare time to good works. She was, of course, not happy; yet she did not lack one essential to the endurance of unhappiness, something to look forward to. Sooner or later, she felt assured, her odious daughter-in-law would so far overstep the bounds of decency as to become liable to legal and moral ejection, and it must be owned that her daughter-in-law's conduct was of a nature to foster that sanguine expectation. So she lived in hope, waiting upon events with grim patience and with a reliance upon Heavenly justice which forbade her to fear that she would die without enjoying the triumph that was her due.

To visit her son at Leonard's End was, as she told him in reply to repeated entreaties, out of the question; but she saw him occasionally when he was in London, and once or twice, when she could not help it, extended rigid fingers for Lily to shake. At other seasons of the year Leonard's letters to her were so often left unanswered that he gradually relinquished the habit of writing, and during his rather long period of absence in Paris his mother did not hear from him at all. It was only through a chance encounter, at a charity bazaar, with her former neighbour Mrs. Vyse that she became aware of that other chance encounter beyond the Channel which had had results as yet unknown to her informant.

"I can't help rejoicing that they have met," Mrs. Vyse wistfully said; "I can't help hoping that, now the ice has

been broken, we may be allowed to forget bygones. The General is as stern and obstinate as ever about it; he says Juliet may come home if she likes, but nothing will induce him to receive Mr. Morant in his house. Yet, since Lord Leonard is willing to be friends with them again, why shouldn't we?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Mrs. Leonard chillingly; "it is a matter of personal sympathy or antipathy, perhaps. As for my son, he is always willing to be friends with anybody, and I see no reason myself for his harbouring a grudge against Mr. Morant. As you are aware, I was never enthusiastic about the match which Mr. Morant brought to nothing."

Meek as the other lady was, she could not resist remarking, "Still, you would have preferred it, I suppose, to the marriage which Lord Leonard actually made."

"It would have been preferable in some ways, no doubt; I only meant that from my point of view there is no particular difficulty in forgiving Mr. Morant. What you say seems to show that he has been forgiven."

"Oh, yes; Juliet writes as if there had been a complete renewal of intimacy. She tells me that she has seen a great deal of Lord Leonard, and that he has been so kind and quite like his old self."

"He will always be like himself," Mrs. Leonard somewhat tartly returned, "and he will never be like other people."

She was secretly a little vexed by the news thus imparted to her; a little vexed also that it should have come to her ears after that indirect fashion. For, although she did not always choose to write to her son, she expected him to write to her more often than he did, and she was not so sure as she would have liked to be that there was no special cause for his recent silence. She knew his unchangeableness; she knew (for indeed he had long ceased to make any secret of that fact) that there was absolute estrangement between him and his wife, and she thought a reversion to former fealty on his part by no means unlikely. Well, that would never do! Happen what might, Lady Leonard must be given no pretext for pleading that

she had been sinned against, as well as sinning. After some days she had almost made up her mind to despatch a hortatory missive to Paris, when such intervention was rendered unnecessary by the entrance of Leonard himself. He had only returned to Grosvenor Place on the previous evening, he told her; so that he had lost no time in fulfilling a filial duty.

"You have been a very long time in Paris," was almost the first thing that she said to him. "I hear that you came across your old flame there."

He frowned slightly. "Yes, we met the Morants—who told you that?—and naturally we could not cut them."

"According to Mrs. Vyse, who has had letters from her daughter, you threw yourself into their arms. I should have thought that so much warmth was uncalled for and possibly even imprudent; but perhaps you know your own business best. What had your wife to say about it?"

Leonard breathed more freely. For a moment he had feared that undesirable rumours might have reached London; but it was evident that his mother had as yet no inkling of these, and he answered:

"My wife is not inclined to be jealous. Even if she were, she would have nothing to fear from Mrs. Morant, who never cared for me and who, I believe, still cares as much as she ever did for her husband."

"H'm! Then why all those weeks in Paris?"

"Well, I had some subjects to get up which it was easier to study there than in England. Besides, Lily wished to stay, and, having practically no wishes of my own, I was quite willing to comply with hers."

Mrs. Leonard's foot tapped the carpet impatiently; her son's supineness, both with regard to public and to private affairs, was a perpetual thorn in her side.

"Anything fresh?" she asked abruptly, after a pause.

He knew so well what she meant that he omitted the formality of requesting her to explain. "Nothing that I care to talk about," he replied; "nothing that will help towards the rather improbable event for which you long."

"Then there *has* been something! I suspected as

much! But I cannot allow you to say that I long for an event which must, at best, be scandalous and lowering, nor have I ever been an advocate for the re-marriage of divorced persons. I only see that you may be forced to free yourself from that woman. If she had a son, it would be different; I should think and say then that you ought to go on living with her, in spite of all."

"I am sure you would," returned Leonard, smiling; for he was well aware that Lily's childlessness was an even greater sin in his mother's eyes than the levity of her conduct. Mrs. Leonard, of course, obtained no further information from him respecting Lily's conduct abroad. All she was told was that it had been "very much what it habitually is," and some sharp strictures upon the culpable indifference of his own failed to render him more communicative.

Comforting and exciting intelligence was, however, in store for a lady who, although she saw so little of the gay world, was not entirely out of touch with smart persons. She heard before Leonard did—but that, perhaps, was scarcely surprising—rumours of an alleged quarrel between her son and his former schoolfellow and of the cause commonly assigned for that quarrel; it was likewise confided to her that Lady Leonard, since her return to London, had been more vulgarly ostentatious than ever in her flirtations and her ways of going on, and that people were beginning to fight shy of her. This latter statement was easily verified, and was indeed accurate. There are "ways of going on" which are blandly tolerated or ignored in a community which cannot nowadays be called straitlaced, while there are others which challenge and receive condemnation. Perhaps Lily, who was an underbred woman, did not know how to draw required distinctions, or it may be that the mortification which Archie's behaviour had undoubtedly inflicted upon her made her additionally reckless. Reckless, at all events, she appeared to be, and at length she began to notice that not only were her invitations very generally declined, but that she was left out of entertainments to which she had fully expected to be asked. This did not please her, and

her impulse, when displeased, was to attack her husband, to whom at other moments she seldom spoke.

"I suppose you are aware," she said suddenly one day, "that you have got me into everybody's black books by fighting that stupid duel on my account."

"I did not fight it exactly on your account," he answered, "and I certainly was not aware that it had been talked about here. Has it been talked about?"

"Oh, dear, yes!—talked about all over the place for the last fortnight or more. And the consequence is that there is a sort of conspiracy to send me to Coventry."

Leonard wrinkled up his forehead in some annoyance. "Are you sure," he asked, "that the conspiracy, if it exists, is a consequence of what, after all, can only be hearsay reports? I should have thought that there might have been other reasons."

"Would you? Well, there isn't much doubt about the existence of the conspiracy, anyhow, and I'm getting rather sick of this. I have half a mind to cut London and ask a few decent people to come down and keep me company at Leonard's End."

So far as her husband was concerned, she was very welcome to take that course. He smiled, guessing who the decent people were likely to be and what were their claims to be described by that adjective.

"Provided that you don't ask me to join the rural party!" said he.

"*You!*—I should as soon think of asking your mother! No; you can stay where you are, or go to the North Pole, if you like. You won't advertise the fact that we are two quite so glaringly in that way as by living under the same roof with me and pretending not to see me."

"I am sorry," answered Leonard, "if I have seemed to advertise what is nobody's business but our own; still I can't offer to change my attitude, which, if you will consider it, is the only one open to me. Fortunately, there is no need for us to spend a great deal of our time under the same roof."

Such was his conscientious opinion. Of course it may be said of him—and indeed was said in the sequel—that

he gave his wife every encouragement to make herself impossible; but he conceived, rightly or wrongly, that she could not make herself worse than she already was, and that she was entitled to nothing at his hands beyond the forbearance which he had shown towards her for another's sake. For that other's sake, he was distressed to hear that the secret of the duel had not been kept; yet so far as he was able to ascertain in the course of the few following days, such versions of it as had permeated to London were of a vague order and could scarcely harm her. The only person who appeared to be bent upon causing trouble, if she could, was his mother, whom he found, on the occasion of his next visit to her, in a state of excitement which even her iron self-command was powerless to disguise.

"What is all this," she asked, "about your having fought that man Morant in Paris and wounded him? Am I to believe that you were mad enough to give him an excuse for challenging you? Or is the contrary story, incredible as it sounds, genuine, and did the fault lie with him and your wretched wife? I insist upon the truth!"

"You shall have what you insist upon, mother," answered Leonard, after a moment of reflection, "if you will give me your word that it shall go no further. You will neither agree with my views nor approve of them; but you cannot alter them, and I would rather, upon the whole, that you knew precisely how I stand."

So, having obtained her rather reluctant promise, he proceeded to tell her the whole truth—with the result which he had foreseen.

"Then it just comes to this," Mrs. Leonard exclaimed bitterly, "that in order to render a doubtful service to a woman who has behaved as badly to you as any woman could, you accept disgrace and dishonour!"

"That is putting it rather too strongly, I think. What I accept, for the reason that you have named, is not so much disgrace or dishonour as discomfort, and even that, owing to the circumstance that I am a rich man, admits of being reduced to endurable proportions. My wife, for example, has now seen fit to take herself off to the coun-

try, and how she proposes to spend the summer I neither know nor care. I myself shall very soon start on a yachting cruise which may last several months. In short, we shall see as little as possible of one another for the future."

"You speak," cried Mrs. Leonard, "as if the word duty had no meaning for you!"

"Then I don't speak as I feel. But I suppose the word may have different meanings for different people."

"That is only as much as to say that some people can contrive to shut their eyes to their duty. Yours is as clear as daylight to me."

No doubt it was, and he sympathised in some degree with her notion of it, although this did not happen to accord with his own. That she would keep a vigilant eye upon Lily's proceedings during his absence he felt assured, and of any evidence that might be forthcoming of a nature to release him from his bondage he was prepared to avail himself; only he had no intention, happen what might, of doing what he knew that his mother was eager for him to do. He could not for the life of him see anything so desperately calamitous as she did in the extinction of an ancient title, nor was he disposed to take the chance of burning his fingers a second time.

In the interests of peace and quietness, however, he kept his ideas to himself, and not long after this he was enabled to shape a course for latitudes where he could give a free rein to all the ideas in his head without danger of being interrogated by anybody respecting them. The yawl which had afforded solace to his affliction two years before, and of which he had subsequently become the owner, bore him away to the North Cape, to Iceland, to the Orkneys and the Shetlands and other regions not easily communicated with by post; for weeks and months he prolonged a desultory cruise, with no other company than that of his skipper and the winds and the waves, thus obtaining what was probably the nearest approach to happiness within his reach. The sea remained, as heretofore, his rough, but faithful friend; of the sea's hundred moods he never wearied, while the sense of seclusion with which it soothed him had lost nothing of the old charm

for one whose fellow-mortals showed themselves so often the reverse of soothing. Some of the best lyrics that he ever wrote were composed at this time: also a few prose studies, which were decidedly superior to the verses, but by which he set little store. From his wife he did not receive a single line, nor did he address any to her, and amongst the letters which he picked up at various ports were only a few from Mrs. Leonard—brief, cold and devoid of domestic intelligence. Reading between the lines, he divined how much she regretted having bound herself not to divulge the events of the spring and how far she was from pardoning his refusal to turn the same to lawful account.

It was, therefore, with the utmost surprise that, on his unwilling return home in the late autumn, he saw his mother advance across the entrance hall at Leonard's End to meet and greet him. Such a portent, he instinctively felt, after the first shock of amazement, could have but one meaning, and the moment that he was out of sight and hearing of the servants he asked:

"Has she actually eloped, then?"

"My dear Leonard," remonstrated the old lady, "do you suppose that I should not have telegraphed to you if a catastrophe of that kind had taken place? No; I am thankful to say that your wife has not so disgraced herself and you; but—she is expecting!"

"Expecting what?" he bewilderedly asked.

"Why, the one event, of course, which we none of us ventured any longer to expect. It was only by a side wind that I heard how things were; but as soon as I did hear I felt that I must dismiss all pride and resentment and go to her. So I came."

"Good Heavens!"

"Yes; I do not say that it was pleasant to me to do so, nor can I say that she has made my stay here during the last few weeks pleasant; but I had, and have, a duty to perform. We know what happened last time, owing to want of proper care and precautions; these must not be neglected again. Fortunately, she is frightened about herself, which makes her more manageable. You will find

her lying down, and I wish to urge upon you very strongly the desirability of a reconciliation. I should be the last to deny that she has been greatly to blame in the past; but we have to consider the future. I think, too, that there is, at any rate, a doubt as to whether she has been guilty of anything worse in the past than extreme imprudence, and that we ought, under the circumstances, to allow her the benefit of that doubt."

A wry smile was visible for a moment upon Leonard's countenance. No concession, evidently, would be refused by his mother in return for the gift of an heir to the family dignities; but how about his individual dignity, thus so strangely and seriously menaced? He did not say much, feeling that what there was to be said had better, upon the whole, be left unsaid; nor, when he presently saw her, did he address any of the observations which were upon the tip of his tongue to his wife, who seemed to be really out of health and was quite unquestionably out of spirits. She was also a good deal out of temper.

"I never was more disgusted or more miserable!" she candidly told him. "The chances are that I shall die, which of course will delight you, and the last days of my life seem likely to be embittered by the presence of my mother-in-law, whom I haven't the energy to shoo away. I suppose you aren't charitable enough to do that for me, are you?"

He shook his head. "I am afraid I am not brutal enough," he answered.

But indeed he was charitable enough for anything, as was proved by his conduct during the long succession of trying weeks that followed. They were weeks of trial more severe than seemed to be recognised by either of the ladies between whom it devolved upon him to keep the peace; but he endured them patiently, heroically, the one conviction ever present to his mind being that only a coward could utter such words as he had perhaps, strictly speaking, the right to utter. Lily was what she was; yet her condition, both in her own opinion and in that of her medical advisers, was of a nature to warrant grave anxiety, and he could not bring himself to be a

murderer. So he held his peace and offered up prayers which, had she been made aware of them, would have horrified his mother, who was besieging Heaven with diametrically contrary supplications.

Not until the new year did Heaven respond after a fashion which caused Leonard to exclaim from his heart "Thank God!" For in the dark February days his wife became the mother of a very small daughter and was herself, far sooner than had been anticipated, pronounced to be out of danger. It was not, to be sure, gratitude in respect of the latter pronouncement that drew forth the above pious ejaculation, nor could Mrs. Leonard, who was present at the time, forbear from commenting upon its singular inappropriateness.

"We must accept what is sent to us," she remarked; "but I do not know that we are anywhere told to return thanks for a cruel disappointment. It is possible—I might almost say probable—that you will never have a son now."

"You may go further than that, mother," answered Leonard, his lips at length unsealed, "and call it certain. I shall never have a son of my own, and I do not, strange as it may appear to you, covet a son, or even a daughter, of somebody else's."

To her dying day Mrs. Leonard did not quite forgive him that speech. She stigmatised it at the time as a monstrous one; yet its monstrosity, one may presume, consisted less, by her way of thinking, in the insult which it implied to his wife than in the deathblow which she instinctively felt that it struck at her own hopes.

"You will have a miserable life, Leonard," she predicted, "and in my opinion you will have deserved nothing else."

CHAPTER XIX

The Next Generation

ONE evening, not many years ago, Lord Leonard and his daughter Muriel were amongst the guests at a dinner given by a personage holding a high official post at Court. They had been asked to an entertainment mainly official because Lord Leonard, although not a member of the existing administration and regretfully recognised by that and previous administrations as ineligible for ministerial rank, was nevertheless a power in the land by reason of his wealth, his social standing and a vexatious habit that he had of writing impartial articles in current periodicals to show that the political party to which he belonged was rather more often in the wrong than in the right. This quiet, urbane, taciturn man, with the long, melancholy visage and the grizzled head, was worth conciliating, if a little difficult to conciliate, while his beautiful daughter (she might really have been pronounced beautiful even if she had not been the almost certain heiress of her father's great possessions) was of course a valuable guest to any lady who had younger sons and natural maternal ambitions.

The dinner was followed by a select reception which partook of the nature of a concert; for the personage's wife, being a lover of music, was wont to enliven after that fashion the tedium of enforced hospitality, and any vocal or instrumental renderings that were heard in her house were sure to be good. Some of the performers were paid in coin for their services; others were differently remunerated, if remunerated at all. To the latter category evidently belonged a handsome, stoutish lady, no longer young, with whom nobody seemed to be acquainted, but whose voice was of so fine a quality and so admirably

managed that she might very well have passed for a professional. Muriel Leonard, a tall, stately-looking girl, dressed in a style somewhat old for her years and wearing jewels more costly than unmarried women usually wear, was unable, on being interrogated, to gratify the general curiosity; but she glanced over her shoulder towards her father, who was leaning against the wall behind her, and asked, "Do you know who that is?"

Lord Leonard, staring into space, with a far-away look in his eyes, started and bent forward. "I beg your pardon?" said he.

When the question was repeated, he answered, "Well, oddly enough, I believe I do. If her name is Morant, it is a generation since I last heard her sing; but there are voices and faces which one does not forget. I will find out from our hostess."

He suited the action to the word, and obtained prompt confirmation of his surmise.

"My widow, do you mean? Isn't she magnificent? Past her best, of course; still better than any other amateur in London that I know of. I came across her by the merest chance last week and grabbed her instantly. Yes, she is a Mrs. Morant; did you ever meet her before? Oh, but, now that I come to think of it, you *would* have met her. Didn't her people live in your part of the world once upon a time?"

Lord Leonard nodded gravely. "They lived there until they died there; but they have been dead for I don't remember how long. I wonder whether she would recollect me if you were to do me the honour of presenting me to her?"

She recollected him perfectly, and remarked, with a friendly smile, that they ought not to require the formality of an introduction to one another. It was scarcely surprising that the lady who performed that ceremony should not have recollected what had once been pretty well known; for she herself had been in the schoolroom at the time of Lord Leonard's engagement to Miss Vyse, and his lordship's subsequent history had been of a kind to obliterate the memory of such early episodes. His own

memory of Juliet Morant was at once vivid and irreconcilable with actualities, as is apt to be the case with such memories. He had often thought of her, had sometimes heard indirect news of her, had seldom or never wished to be brought into personal contact with her again. She represented something for him—his youth, to be concise—but he had grown middle-aged, not to say old; his youth and his love were alike dead and buried; to stand thus face to face with a healthy, apparently cheerful survival of extinct things was a little saddening, a little disconcerting.

Mrs. Morant, however, did not seem to share his sensations. After the obligatory, unavoidable commonplaces had been exchanged, she exclaimed:

"But what a pleasure it is to see you once more! I should have recognised you at once, although your hair has gone grey, as black hair always does. I wonder whether you would have recognised me?"

"Well, I did," he answered, adding something complimentary about her voice.

Her hair was not grey, only colourless, and her complexion retained that species of freshness which is the prerogative of thick epidermis; but her figure was a thing of the past. She may have guessed the criticism which could not but suggest itself to him; for she rejoined, with a good-humoured laugh:

"In spite of my being such a fat old woman? Well, one comfort is that at our time of life it really doesn't matter much what one looks like. What does matter—don't you think so?—is that one should still be able to take an interest in life; and that one is sure to do, so long as one has children."

He made a gesture of assent. "Tell me about your children," said he.

She was very willing to comply with his request. They sat down, side by side, and she gave him a full account of herself and her belongings, chatting very freely, confidentially and pleasantly, as to an old friend, upon whose sympathy she was aware that she might count.

"We have lived almost entirely abroad all these years; my poor husband—you know, perhaps, that I lost him nearly ten years ago?—preferred it, and after his death there were educational and economical reasons for our remaining where we were. England didn't seem to offer any particular attractions; for my father and mother were no more, my brothers and sisters were dispersed and the old home was broken up. Now it is rather different. My eldest boy, Harry, who is here this evening, and whom you may remember as a baby in Paris—how remote those days seem, don't they?—has at last come into a little money, through the death of an aunt. Not very much; still enough to enable him to reside upon his own small property, which has hitherto been let. So he has decided to leave the Army, and I suppose we shall all live with him down in Dorsetshire until he marries. I only hope he will fix his affections upon some young lady with a modest dowry! My two girls are finishing their education at a French school; as they can't hear me, and as I am sure that you are not less discreet than of old, I may tell you that they are both pretty and clever. I don't feel more anxiety about their future than a mother is bound to feel. Then there is my youngest boy, Archie, who is going to be a sailor. Perhaps I ought rather to say that he *is* a sailor; for he has reached his last term on the *Britannia* and I am assured that he is safe to pass out. You would like Archie, I think; everybody likes him, and he is the very image of what his father used to be."

That circumstance, Leonard thought, might account for the popularity of Archie the younger, while it might also cause some misgivings to his nearest relations; but of course he did not say anything so disobliging. He sat, as was his wont, with crossed legs and long, lean hands clasped round one knee, listening, smiling at intervals, occupied apparently with his own somewhat mournful meditations.

"I am thrusting all my affairs upon you and hearing nothing of yours," his neighbour presently resumed. "How has the world been treating you since we were both young?"

To put such a question was to give the measure of her indifference or forgetfulness. She must know—how could she help knowing what had been in all the papers and had been something more than a nine days' wonder?—that Lord Leonard's domestic affairs had not marched smoothly. His wife's notorious delinquencies, culminating in an intrigue with an actor, once celebrated, and an undefended divorce suit—these things, to be sure, were ancient history; yet it seemed odd that she should speak as though she expected him either to ignore or refer to them. His faintly ironical, interrogative smile reminded her, perhaps, that he could scarcely make reply with ease and truth; for she hastened to add:

"I want to hear about your daughter, I mean. Of course, as regards yourself, I am aware, like everybody else, of what a name you have made in politics and literature and—and of how distinguished you are."

"Am I distinguished?" he returned. "I doubt whether, if I were to take a poll of this assemblage, or of a wider one, I should obtain a verdict to that effect. My daughter, I believe, is considered to have a certain distinction. That is to say that she is handsome and self-possessed and very generally admired. There she is, on the opposite side of the room, just under the full glare of the electric light, of which she has as yet no reason to fight shy. You can judge for yourself of the accuracy of my description."

He spoke drily and with an absence of paternal partiality which could not but be noticeable under the circumstances. Mrs. Morant shot a rapid glance at him before half rising and putting up her glasses to survey the young lady to whom her attention was directed.

"So that is Miss Leonard, with the splendid diamonds in her hair!" she exclaimed. "Yes; she is indeed handsome—most strikingly handsome! But she is not a bit like"—

An abrupt pause showed that the speaker had checked herself upon the verge of another indiscretion. The worst of Muriel Leonard was, in truth, that she was not a bit like a Leonard. On the other hand, she bore, save in the

matter of colouring, little resemblance to her submerged, disgraced and well-nigh forgotten mother. Did she at all resemble the tall, good-looking, fresh-complexioned young man with whom she was at that moment engaged in conversation? It may have been Leonard's fancy, but it certainly struck him like a flash that she did when Mrs. Morant went on:

"Oh, and that is my boy Harry talking to her! How strange that they should have foregathered!"

It was perhaps a little strange that Miss Leonard should have troubled herself to bestow anything more than a bow upon the young man whom somebody had introduced to her; for she was accustomed to hold her head somewhat high, and she had a large acquaintance, to which she did not, as a rule, expect additions to be made without her previous consent having been requested and given. But something about this Mr. Morant's personality had chanced, for no reason that she knew of, to attract her. That he, on his side, was attracted by her she very soon discovered; but she was too well accustomed to discoveries of that kind to be influenced by them, one way or the other. Possibly it was because he was new, and because his whole bearing differed slightly from that of the gilded youths whose advances had become wearisomely familiar to her, that she drew her dress away, as a signal that he might sit down beside her, if he liked. The promptitude with which he availed himself of her permission and the frank admiration which his clear blue eyes speedily showed her, as has been said, that she had made one more conquest, and she could, when she chose (she did not often choose) be very friendly and agreeable with her victims.

Now, there is one quite infallible way, employed instinctively and successfully by Miss Leonard's sex from time immemorial, of being agreeable to men, young and old, which is to talk to them, and induce them to talk, about themselves. To this method of making friends Harry Morant lent himself without hesitation, and if he was a little garrulous, he was also candid, modest and refreshingly simple. He was going, he said, rubbing his

hands gleefully, to be a country gentleman—the very thing that he had always longed to be, but had entertained no expectation of becoming until he should be long past his prime. A rare stroke of luck, however, in the shape of a substantial legacy, had enabled him to send in his papers, abandon the military career which had no special charms for him and take up his residence on the not very extensive paternal acres in Dorsetshire.

"It will be a bit of a squeeze, I expect; we shall just manage to do it and no more; but, after all, it isn't as if one could live on one's pay in the Army. When I have got up farming and pulled things straight, my mother and the girls will be better off, living with me, I daresay, than they would have been if they had had to house themselves. And one will get one's hunting and shooting pretty cheap, I should think—which will satisfy me. It wouldn't satisfy you, I suppose," he went on, with a smiling, interrogative glance at his companion; "you prefer this sort of thing, no doubt."

"No," she answered; "I am fond of a country life, and I spend much more of the year in the country than in London. As for what you call this sort of thing, I neither like nor dislike it; it is all in the day's work."

"I should imagine," the young man sagely remarked, "that most women would like it."

"Most women of my age and in my unusually independent position, you mean? Perhaps so; but very few women of my age have had such a long dose of independence as I have. There is no particular satisfaction in sitting at the head of the table and receiving people and being treated almost as deferentially as if you were married when it has been like that ever since you came out. In my case, it began to be like that some time before I came out; for I had practically no childhood. My mother died while I was still in the nursery; I don't even remember her."

Harry stared. He did not know that Lady Leonard was dead, although he knew that she had been divorced. Was it possible that this beautiful, somewhat discontented-looking girl had been kept in ignorance of the

latter circumstance? Her next words seemed to indicate that such was indeed the case.

"Although I can't remember my mother," said she, "I have often missed her. Mothers, somehow, seem to be rather irreplaceable sort of persons."

Her companion nodded. "Oh, yes," he agreed; "I'm sure I don't know what would have become of us all without mine. By the way, has Lord Leonard ever mentioned her to you?"

"Never until this evening, when he thought he recognised her after she had sung."

"Hasn't he? Well she has often spoken to me about him. She always says he is the very best man she ever met in her life."

Lord Leonard's daughter received this handsome tribute with less show of enthusiasm or gratitude than might have been anticipated. "My father," she remarked, "is one of those men of whom everybody will say, and say quite truly, when he dies that he was universally respected."

"That," returned her companion sapiently, "sounds as if he wasn't universally beloved."

"It is only nonentities who are, and he isn't a non-entity; though I believe he would like to be. However, I should imagine that he is much more loved than hated. He gives away a great deal of money."

"Well, but which do you do?" the young fellow somewhat presumptuously asked. "Love him or hate him?—or neither?"

Miss Leonard laughed. It was the first time that she had laughed during their colloquy, and he could not help noticing how charmingly mirth transfigured her face. Like a sudden outburst of sunlight upon a beautiful, but sombre landscape, he thought.

"Have we known one another quite long enough, Mr. Morant," she returned, "for me to tell you that I hate my father? Or even that I adore him?"

"It would be all right for you to say that you adored him, I suppose; and even if you owned to doing the other thing, it would go no further. I'm as safe as they're

made. Anyhow," continued Harry, who had inherited, with his late father's comeliness, a share of his late father's amiable audacity, "I am sure Lord Leonard must adore you."

Her laugh, this time, was shorter and less light-hearted. "Well," she answered, "he certainly gives me a great deal of money. Here he comes, with your mother in tow. Now I am going to be asked what evenings we have disengaged, and you are going to be asked which of them would suit you for giving us the pleasure of your company at dinner."

Her prediction, after introductory formalities had been gone through, was verified; but Lord Leonard, it appeared, was not satisfied with offering mere London hospitality to an old friend.

"Mrs. Morant has been telling me," he presently announced, "that she is on the lookout for a house somewhere in the country while her own future home is being painted and furnished. I was wondering whether Woodside might not answer her purpose."

Woodside was the name of a pretty little place on the Leonard's End estate which had been occupied by the late Mrs. Leonard during the last years of her life, and which was for the moment untenanted.

"It will be great luck for us if Woodside does answer Mrs. Morant's purpose," Muriel graciously declared.

"I can't imagine anything more likely to do so," was that lady's smiling response. "How well I remember Woodside!—and how I should enjoy seeing all the old country once more! The only question is whether the rent would not be beyond our modest powers."

"Oh, it won't be that," the landlord hastened to assure her; "it won't be that. As a matter of fact, I am glad enough to have the house aired and inhabited. At all events, you might run down and have a look at it one of these days."

Mrs. Morant's thanks were cordially echoed by Harry, who, truth to tell, would gladly have paid a higher rent than he could afford for the privilege of being temporarily established in Miss Leonard's neighbourhood. Mean-

while, an early date was agreed upon for him and his mother to dine in Grosvenor Place.

"Was Mrs. Morant ever a very intimate friend of yours?" Muriel inquired, on the homeward drive.

"Yes, I knew Mrs. Morant intimately once upon a time," answered her father. "She is a daughter of old General Vyse, whom you may just remember."

"According to her son, she describes you as the best man she has ever met in her life."

"Indeed? That is not over flattering to the others; but I seem to recall her having been a little given to the use of superlatives in old days. What she probably means is that I was once able to do her a trifling service in years gone by."

He relapsed into his accustomed silence, and Muriel asked no further questions—possibly felt no further curiosity. But just before stepping out of the carriage she remarked:

"I rather like that young Mr. Morant. He seems to have a way of taking it for granted that people will like him which leaves them scarcely any choice."

"Does he?" asked Leonard absently. "Ah, I daresay—I daresay! History repeats itself."

He could not have been thinking of what he was saying; his thoughts, indeed, were always apt to stray far afield. Assuredly, he scented no possible peril to Muriel, whom he had dispassionately studied and whom he deemed to be as cold as she was ambitious.

PART II



CHAPTER XX

Archie the Second

IS it really possible to tell a child, or even a young girl, that her mother has been an abandoned woman in every sense of that term? Lord Leonard, who under almost all conceivable circumstances was for speaking the truth, had decided that in Muriel's case this was not possible, and the child was, therefore, brought up in the belief that he was a widower. Neither her childhood nor her adolescence could be called happy, notwithstanding the luxuries by which she was surrounded and the complete liberty which, after the death of her stern old grandmother, was accorded to her. Quite early in life she found out that her father, though invariably kind, was not fond of her, while Mrs. Leonard, who could not forgive her her sex, treated her with an icy severity which struck terror into her very soul. Such playmates as the neighbourhood afforded she had; but it so chanced that she became intimate with none of them, and a succession of governesses pronounced her proud, reserved, difficult to influence. She grew up with the fixed idea that she was destined to be always alone, that she was—through no fault of her own, or through some fault which she could not detect—hopelessly unpopular and that, if she had been poor and plain, instead of being (as in due season she could not but discover that she was) rich and beautiful, nobody would ever care to address a second word to her.

This embittering conviction was not shaken by the ultimate advent and attentions of many suitors. She knew, or believed she knew, well enough what they wanted, and

she also knew that, in the event of her turning the favourable ear which she refused to their addresses, they would not get quite as much as they expected. For upon this point at least her father had deemed it his duty to be explicit. He could dispose of his estates as might seem desirable to him, and he wished her to understand that she must in no wise count upon inheriting them. A considerable fortune in money she would obtain when he died; but he had relatives—distant ones, it was true, yet male relatives—to whom the task of administering a large landed property might be more fitly intrusted. No doubt, amongst the many young men who wanted to marry Miss Leonard, there were some who would have been content to take her without a penny, and more who would have been delighted to do so upon the certainty of a good income and the chance of great wealth; but she rejected one and all, for the conclusive reason that they failed to touch her heart. Her father, who never understood her—and who, it is to be feared, did not try very hard to understand her,—credited her with a different motive. That she was hard and cold her demeanour at home (the mere reflection of his own, had he but perceived it!) had rendered evident to him; that she set more store than he himself did by rank, show, and power, she had often avowed in his hearing. She was waiting, he thought, for some more lofty alliance than had as yet offered itself to her, and he saw no reason why her desire should not be gratified. If she wished to be a duchess, she might very likely become a duchess. There was, to be sure, the disadvantage of her birth against her; but dukes are not necessarily more fastidious about such matters than other people.

Now, it was true that high worldly station had a certain charm, although no very potent one, for Muriel. People who cannot have what they want must perforce seek substitutes for the same, and she meant, if she ever married at all, to marry a man whose name would shed lustre of one kind or another upon her. At any rate, she could not contemplate espousing a person of Harry Morant's obscurity; so, as soon as she saw that the young man was

beginning to fall more or less seriously in love with her, she considerably snubbed him. He was favoured with that evidence of the genuine and disinterested liking that she had conceived for him after he had dined twice in Grosvenor Place and had three or four times contrived to encounter Miss Leonard elsewhere. She did not snub him with any severity, merely intimating that he was a little in the way and that there were other people with whom she wished to converse; but he was young enough to take her hint so much to heart that he left London without more ado. He was wanted down at his own place, the arrival of his sisters from abroad set him free, and he was conscious of having made an ass of himself. How could he have been so fatuous as to imagine that the interest which Miss Leonard had seemed to take in him and his affairs could mean anything more than that he had momentarily amused her! Off he went, therefore, with his ears down, and that, apparently, was the last of him.

For although Mrs. Morant became the willing tenant of Woodside, although she and her family came into residence there early in the summer, and although there was a prompt interchange of visits and other civilities between the new-comers and their grand neighbours at Leonard's End, Harry remained far away in Dorsetshire. "He tells me that he has his hands quite full of jobs," his mother said, in reply to kind inquiries, "and that we must not expect him before we see him. Of course he is right. The trade of a country gentleman has to be learnt, like other trades, and he can't do better than take it up seriously."

Muriel was just a little bit disappointed. She had a fancy for the young fellow, though she did not desire to break his heart, and her life in the country—even when the house was full of visitors, as it generally was—was not less lonely than her life in London. The two Morant girls, Katie and May, were no acquisition to her. They were pretty, sprightly, well educated, and achieved an immediate local success; but they evidently preferred the opposite sex to their own, and they did not, upon the whole, seem worth laborious cultivation. As for Archie,

the budding Nelson, who was restored to his family pending his appointment to one of Her Majesty's ships, he was a nice sort of boy; but Muriel had never cared much for schoolboys.

Very different was the impression which this young gentleman produced upon her father. From the first day of their meeting there sprang up between the pair—divided by so vast a gulf of years, situation, and temperament—a friendship which was destined to stand the test of time, and which was based, strangely enough, upon complete mutual comprehension. Archie, to be sure, was not difficult to understand. Healthy, pleasant-mannered, full of vitality and an ardent lover of all games and sports, he personified the breed which this country turns out annually, and will continue to turn out, let us hope, despite the more and more audible growls of those who ignorantly decry the prominent place assigned to athletics in our national system of training. He was not particularly clever and not at all stupid; he spoke the truth, feared nothing and had what goes by the name of an instinctive perception of human character—although this is not really instinctive, but is the result of more or less unconscious experience, acquired at cricket and football. Being what he was, he could not fail to attract Lord Leonard, who himself in many respects so unlike that, had always longed to be like that. His physical resemblance to his late father, moreover, was a further recommendation to the favour of one who had never forgotten the somewhat misplaced hero-worship of his own boyhood, nor ever doubted that Archie the elder had had in him the makings of a hero. For the rest, this boy was something of an improvement upon the dead Archie, inasmuch as his features were reminiscent also of Juliet's, and there was a suggestion of refinement about them which the other's had lacked. The result of close, but furtive, scrutiny during a luncheon party at Leonard's End, which was the means of first bringing two kindred spirits together, was that, as soon as the ladies had quitted the room, Lord Leonard rose and, walking around the table, laid his hand upon his youthful guest's shoulder.

"What do you think of doing this afternoon?" he asked. "Anything particular?"

The boy glanced quickly at the long, grave countenance which many people thought forbidding, and did not appear to find it so. "No," he answered, "I don't think there's anything particular. I was in hopes that, if there was time, I might get in a game of racquets over at Mapleton; but the fellow who asked me to play can't turn up; so that's knocked on the head." He added meditatively, "It's rather a bore."

"A great bore," Leonard agreed; "but, as you can't play racquets, we must try to manage something else for you. Would you care to come out for a ride with me?"

"I should like it awfully, thanks," answered Archie, smiling all over, as only boys and dogs can smile; "but I'm not much use on a horse, you know. All the riding I've ever had in my life was with the *Britannia* beagles, when one of the officers used to lend me his pony sometimes. And I got chucked twice."

"I'll put you up on a sober animal who won't chuck you," Leonard promised. "I am no great horseman myself; still I daresay I may be able to give you a hint or two, if you are not too proud to learn."

Thus was initiated an intimacy from which Leonard derived what was probably the one unmixed satisfaction that existence had to give him. His longing to have a boy of his own had always been very strong (though not quite strong enough to reconcile him to the necessary preliminary measures), and in Archie he recognised the very best available substitute for a joy which could not be his. They hit it off exactly from the outset, those two—each, it may be, discerning in the other the complement wanting to his own mental equipment—and, as one of them subsequently said, they never when together had to bother about explaining themselves. Archie, on returning home that evening, after the first of many equestrian lessons, told his mother and his sisters succinctly that Lord Leonard was "a ripper." It was always a puzzle to Archie that his friend should be generally set down as a haughty and alarming personage.

"Ah, that's because you don't know him," he would

say, in reply to such criticisms. "The truth is that he is about the most modest old chap that ever was, in spite of his being most awfully clever and a real good sportsman into the bargain."

Well, it is possible, perhaps, to be a good sportsman without being either proficient or personally enthusiastic in the matter of sport.

Leonard had, at any rate, a vicarious enthusiasm with regard to the harmonious working of hand and eye which his young ally was admirably qualified to gratify. There ensued in those days local cricket matches wherein Archie highly distinguished himself, while at Mapleton, a neighbouring country house, adjoining which a racquet-court had been built by the owner, he easily defeated all opponents. Leonard used to look on by the hour in mute contentment, enjoying his protégé's triumphs much more than he would have enjoyed a laudatory article upon his own poems—which thing, by the way, was denied to him throughout his literary career. In the evenings the boy and he would walk or ride homewards together, Archie chatting most of the time, the older man listening, with an occasional laugh, and putting in a word here and there. What precisely they saw in one another amused onlookers could not tell; but the spectacle of their friendship was, for various reasons, a satisfactory one to everybody, with the possible exception of Muriel, to whom this capacity for quasi-paternal affection on her father's part came as something of a revelation.

But if Muriel ever sighed for paternal affection (and nothing in her manner gave evidence that she did), she had at least the consolation of knowing that she inspired one person with affection of another and perhaps a warmer kind. It was, indeed, impossible to feel much doubt as to that from the day when Harry, released from the claims or agriculture and unable any longer to rest satisfied with the poor comfort of cutting off his nose to spite his face, joined the family circle at Woodside. With his sisters, he became a constant visitor at Leonard's End, which afforded the usual country-house pretexts for constant visits, and he had so much the air of apologising for hav-

ing displayed temper that Muriel could not find it in her heart to be distant with him. His being so smitten with her was, after all, not her doing, nor did she see why she should deny herself the pleasure of a companionship which was really very pleasant. He was, moreover, quite modest, giving it to be understood that he had no ambition beyond that of being suffered to bask for a while in the smiles of his divinity. So she allowed him to bask, while his mother and his sisters, seeing how things were, gave him all the opportunities they could.

"Nothing is likely to come of it; still something may, and she will be enormously rich, and he will be none the worse off for having had this experience," Mrs. Morant remarked, with middle-aged philosophy and common sense.

Late one afternoon Muriel was lazily reclining in a wicker chair on a shady grass-plot of the garden, while her long-legged adorer sprawled at her feet. They had been where they were for the best part of an hour, and she had been encouraging him, as she generally did during prolonged colloquies which were but tentatively and respectfully amatory on his part, to expatiate upon the not very eventful annals of his past life. The way in which he talked about his belongings had ever a great fascination for her; for the Morants were an affectionate and mutually appreciative family.

"What good times you seem to have had always!" she sighed enviously at length. "How I wish I could change places with you!"

"I shouldn't half mind, I can tell you!" returned the young man. "That is," he resumed, after a pause for consideration, "I should like nothing better than to change places with you for, say, twenty-four hours. What a lot we should both know at the end of the time!"

"Yes; more than anybody has ever known since the world began, or ever will know."

"We might arrive at the same result by telling one another everything," Harry sagely observed.

"Only it is absolutely certain that we shall not do that. It appears to be pretty certain, too, that you recognise the

advantage of being yourself, since you wouldn't care to inhabit my body for more than a day, whereas I should be glad to take a permanent lease of yours. It would be worth while to be you, if only for the sake of being as fond of one's nearest relations as you are of yours."

"Oh, well," said Harry, "of course one's own people are one's own people." He added presently, "But they *are* rather particularly nice people, don't you think so?"

Muriel laughed. They were very ordinary sort of people, by her way of thinking; but she answered: "It is particularly nice of you all, anyhow, to have such a sincere admiration for one another."

"You mean, perhaps, that you haven't very much admiration for your father."

"Oh, I admire him; there is a good deal to admire in him. He doesn't return the compliment, though."

"Oh, he *must*, you know!" the young man exclaimed, with such obvious honesty that Muriel laughed again.

"He is considered to be rather eccentric," she remarked; "that may account for the unquestionable fact that he doesn't. How do you yourself get on with him?"

"As well as one can get on with a man who very seldom notices that one is there," answered Harry, laughing also. "Archie simply swears by him, and I must say he has been extraordinarily kind to the boy. The young beggar can manage to get around anybody. Though I really don't believe he tries, you know."

At this moment the inseparable companions came in sight, Lord Leonard's pockets bulging with slain rabbits, while Archie, shouldering a gun, swung the body of a wood-pigeon in his hand. This trophy he brandished triumphantly at his elder brother, calling out:

"It was a jolly long shot, and he was flying like smoke!" He appealed for corroboration to his neighbour, who said:

"It was not an easy shot; but you will find the rocketing pheasants a good deal harder to bring down, I can tell you."

The boy laughed and shook his head. "Ah, I expect I shall be somewhere on the other side of the world by the

time that you begin to shoot your coverts." He glanced at his watch and exclaimed, "Good Lord! Harry, do you know what time it is? We must look sharp about getting home or we shall catch it! We've got to dine early to-night," he exclaimed, for Muriel's benefit, "because my sisters have made up a party to go over to Alston Chase by moonlight. Rather rot, I call it; but I suppose that sort of thing amuses them. I say, are you coming to look on at our cricket match to-morrow?" he continued, turning, with easy familiarity, to Leonard, who answered:

"Well, I was thinking of it. Can I drive you up? I will be at the lodge with a dogcart at eleven o'clock, if that will suit you."

"Right oh!" answered Archie. "Wait for me if you're there first."

He took his elder brother by the arm, unceremoniously cutting short the latter's adieux, and Muriel was left to contemplate in amused curiosity the benevolent smile with which her father gazed at the retreating pair. Had anybody ever before, she wondered, addressed the unapproachable Lord Leonard in the style adopted by this brat?

"Your young friend seems to be pretty well pleased with himself," she remarked.

Leonard started out of a day-dream. "Eh?—pleased with himself? He isn't in the least conceited, if that is what you mean; but a beginner has some right to be pleased when he has killed eight rabbits with ten cart-ridges. Really there is nothing that that boy can't do!"

"Unless he is very unlike other boys and other young men, it will not be long before he does some things which would be better left undone," Muriel drily and a little unkindly observed.

Leonard looked distressed. "Do you think so? Well, perhaps so. Oh, yes; human nature is what it is, and the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be *in sæcula sæculorum*. Nevertheless, Archie starts favourably handicapped, seeing that he has all the instincts of a gentle-

man. What more can one desire for him, or do for him, or give him?"

He sighed and moved slowly towards the house, his hands clasped behind his back. It was evident that his daughter's hint had given a grave turn to his reflections, and it was also evident that he had not so much as taken note of the circumstance that he had surprised his daughter in confidential conversation with a youth who was at least as likely as not to prove one of her numerous suitors. Not even the present chronicler, who yields to no man in esteem and appreciation of the late Lord Leonard, can affirm of him that he was either a fond or a watchful father.

CHAPTER XXI

A Heaven-Sent Miracle

IT was, perhaps, hardly possible for Lord Leonard's feelings to be other than what they were with regard to one who, he was almost sure, had none of his blood in her veins, and who, it must be owned, had from her childhood manifested very little affection for him. He had endeavoured, not altogether successfully, to be just to Muriel, he had likewise endeavoured, with results somewhat more tangible, to be kind to her; but—she was her mother's daughter. He accepted the fact that she was also ostensibly his daughter, born in lawful wedlock, and he had long ago decided that it was no part of his duty to make known to anybody else misgivings which he himself could not but entertain. Eventually, no doubt, she would marry, and from what he knew of her, he was persuaded that she would marry well, in a worldly sense. Suitable settlements would then be made, while at his death she would come into a large fortune. He had always, however—for some reason not very clearly defined in his own mind—disliked the idea of her inheriting the Leonard estates. What he said, and half thought, was that men were better qualified than women to hold authority over landed property; what he secretly felt was that certain collaterals belonged, even if remotely, to the old stock. But he had as yet made no will in favour of any of them; he only reserved—doing so verbally and explicitly, in order to avert possible future disappointment—the right to dispose of his lands as might seem to him fit.

The first time that it came into his head to make young Archie Morant his heir he dismissed the idea with a laugh, as a fantastic, albeit attractive one; but it recurred to

him at more and more frequent intervals, and on each occasion he asked himself less and less hesitatingly why he should not. Had the boy been his own son, he could not have been fonder of him; those distant kinsmen had, of course, not the shadow of a claim to succeed him, and the adoption of an heir is, after all, no unprecedented act on the part of wealthy and childless men. He would have sounded Mrs. Morant upon the subject, if she had been a little more like the Juliet of old days; but with Mrs. Morant his relations had, by force of circumstances, become rather formally friendly, while he himself was still far too like the Leonard of old days to be confidential without a good deal of leading on. So he held his peace for the present, weighing pros and cons, with an increasing bias towards the pros.

Archie had what he himself contentedly described as "a real good slack time" that summer. He was not particularly fond of work, nor was he, pending orders to proceed afloat, required to do any. On the other hand, he thoroughly enjoyed play, and this was provided for him in a measure which satisfied his soul. The one point on which his tastes did not entirely accord with those of his mature playmate was that he had not all the latter's enthusiasm for salt water.

"Ah, that's because you haven't got to do it," he shrewdly remarked, when Leonard, regretting this, said how gladly he would spend the remainder of his own days at sea. "I shouldn't half mind taking your billet, I can tell you! It would suit me down to the ground to lead the sort of life that you lead."

"Ah, that's because you haven't got to do it," returned Leonard, laughing. "Still, I daresay the life might suit you better than it does me, and I am quite sure that you would discharge some of the duties belonging to it better than I do. All the same, I am sorry that the sea doesn't appeal to you; for I can't ask you now to join me on a short yachting cruise—it won't last more than a fortnight at the outside—which I had some thought of proposing."

"Oh, I'll go with you like a shot, if you'll ask me," the boy declared at once. "I should like it most awfully."

It was indeed true that he was willing to go anywhere or do anything with this elderly chum of his, who had quite won his heart; yet credit must be allowed him for an unselfishness and a quick sympathy by no means usual at his age. He was really glad to have an opportunity of making some sort of return for innumerable kindnesses, and he was aware (although he had never been told so) that what Lord Leonard liked best in the world was a brief holiday from home.

So they went down to Southampton together and, embarking on board the old yawl, which repeated repairs and alterations had converted into a practically new one, slipped along the southwestern coast, propelled by light breezes, as far as Fowey and Falmouth and Penzance and the Scilly Islands. Such abrupt departures on Lord Leonard's part were tolerably frequent and involved no disturbance of domestic arrangements. Muriel was as accustomed to receive invited guests without the paternal countenance as they were to be so received; it had long been an understood thing that she should be free to make her own plans, and that her father, provided that he himself was not interfered with, had no desire to interfere either with her or with them.

The system had its advantages, as well as its drawbacks. Amongst the latter was an occasional overwhelming sense of solitude which at that time was relieved only by the society of Harry Morant. Naturally and inevitably, Muriel grew more and more fond of one whose devotion to her was, she really believed, free from any taint of greed and whose attentions were in such marked contrast with those of the other young men to whom she had to show a hostess's civility; but she did not want, and did not mean, to become too fond of him. She knew herself well enough to know that she was not fitted to be the wife of a small country squire. The luxuries and grandeurs to which she was habituated might not be worth much as a substitute for happiness; yet, such as they were, she was disinclined to relinquish them. Her whole training and experience, together with something of her father's determination to be blinded by no illusions,

had led her to the somewhat melancholy conviction that only the material is real. Consequently, the day arrived when there was obviously nothing for it but to give Harry a second dose of the cold shoulder.

"It's about time for me to get out of this," the young man gloomily announced to his mother, after a short course of the above treatment; "I shall be off home."

"Why do you say that, Harry?" Mrs. Morant asked, looking up from the embroidery upon which she was engaged.

"As if you didn't know!" he returned, with a rueful laugh.

Mrs. Morant's children had few, if any, secrets from her; for she had been a good mother to them, and her comforting, common-sense sympathy was always at their service. Of this she now gave evidence by remarking:

"Nothing venture, nothing have. The truth is, my dear boy, that you are aiming rather high, and you must not expect to have everything made quite smooth and easy for you. But at least I wouldn't, if I were you, run away without having declared myself."

"How do you know that I haven't?" Harry retorted.

"Well, I think you would have told me if you had been rejected. It isn't certain that you will be rejected; though I won't raise your hopes by denying that it is probable. What anybody can see is that the girl likes you. Oh, you needn't shake your head; she unquestionably likes you, and she may do more, notwithstanding her reluctance, which is just as visible and unquestionable, to marry a mere commoner. Anyhow, you can be none the worse off for asking her."

"But she won't give me the chance."

"If that is all, I will take care that you get the chance," answered Mrs. Morant, laughing. "I will ask her to come to tea with me, and she can't, or at any rate she won't, refuse to let you see her home. Of course she will be told that you are upon the point of leaving us, and of course she will understand why. Don't be over confident; but don't despair either. She must be hesitating

a little, or she would have sent you about your business long ago."

Mrs. Morant was as good as her word, and tactfully created the desired situation. She could, however, do no more than lead her horses to the water, and Muriel, walking slowly homewards from Woodside on a sultry summer evening, with Harry for her escort, was firmly purposed not to drink. Muriel had wit enough to perceive what lay designedly in store for her, wit enough to acquiesce without demur in the unavoidable, wit enough also (or at all events she hoped so) to prevent her companion from saying things which she did not wish him to say. That she did not intend to accept him, while anxious to escape the necessity of explicitly refusing him, was a mental attitude which he might have deemed significant, had he been made aware of it.

But, naturally, he was not made aware of it. All that was rendered perceptible to him was that the news of his impending departure was neither welcome nor the reverse to Miss Leonard, and that she was kindly desirous of sparing him discomfiture. He said as much as he could, in the face of her bland determination to ignore his meaning, and it was only a sort of wilful longing to hear the worst and have done with it that prompted him at length to exclaim:

"I suppose you wouldn't care two straws if you never saw me again, would you?"

"I should be very sorry if I thought that we should never meet again," she tranquilly replied; "but you must excuse me for not shedding tears over that imaginary and unlikely prospect."

"It isn't a bit unlikely," the young man declared. "Your world and mine are as far apart as if they had the Atlantic Ocean between them; all we have to do is to stay at home, both of us."

"Only nobody ever does stay at home nowadays."

"I shall. Perhaps if I hadn't been an ass, I should have stayed at home this summer; but I daresay you know why I didn't."

"Well, you came here to see your mother and your sisters, I presume."

"No, I came here to see you, Miss Leonard—and I should have done better to remain away, shouldn't I? Not that it would have made so much difference if I had; for I don't love you a bit the less on account of your despising me, and I never shall."

Muriel, thus brought to bay, answered slowly: "I don't despise you; I like you very much indeed, and really that is more than I could say about any other man of my acquaintance"—

"Oh, is it?" he interrupted, snatching eagerly at an avowal which would have discouraged him if he had been a few years older.

"Yes; but in your case that is not enough. It might be, and I daresay it will be, in somebody else's case. It is true, you see, that we inhabit different worlds, and before one can make up one's mind to cross an ocean one must—well, in plain language, one must be in love. Don't you think so yourself?"

He nodded despondently. "Yes, I suppose it has to be that or nothing. I won't bother you any more, then; only I should like, just as my last word to you, to say that I shall never change and never forget. There wouldn't, of course, be much use in my trying to convince you that you won't find liking enough in the case of anybody."

Being already convinced of that, she certainly did not think that much was to be gained by arguing the question; yet, for the sake of multiplying last words, she prolonged the walk and the conversation. They sauntered on through meadow and woodland, discussing an ancient problem as to which all the world is really of one mind, and although they were in substantial agreement, they differed sufficiently for purposes of verbal controversy. It seems to be incontestable that many loveless marriages, or marriages in which the love is all on one side, turn out well; only they have no business to turn out well, and the fact that they do must be regarded by right-minded persons either as an uncovenanted mercy or as a proof that the divine spark in human nature is liable to facile

annihilation. Harry, holding sound premisses, had a little the best of the debate; but Muriel scored when she gently pointed out that what he urged was conclusive as against her marrying him. It might, she acknowledged, be equally conclusive as against her marrying at all, for the circumstance that she was not particularly happy at home and the further circumstance that, in the way of a partial equivalent for happiness, high social position chanced to appeal to her.

"In other words," said he at length, "you only refuse me because I am not a distinguished personage. And the worst of it is that I can't possibly hope to distinguish myself!"

"Not from one moment to another, I am afraid," she agreed, smiling.

Opportunity, however, may come at any moment, and hardly had she so spoken when an excellent chance of distinguishing—or, failing that, of extinguishing—himself was granted by the Fates to Harry Morant. There was between Woodside and Leonard's End a certain deep railway cutting along which cross-country pedestrians, defiant of the Company's regulations, were wont to walk for a matter of fifty yards or so. It was a dangerous thing to do, for the line took a sharp curve at that point; but both Muriel and her present interlocutor had done it often with impunity, and now, being foolishly engrossed in scrutiny of one another's features, they had their senses less on the alert than the situation demanded. On a sudden came the roar of an approaching train; on a sudden the engine, travelling at full speed, was so close upon them that Harry had but just time to snatch the girl out of the jaws of death with such violence that she staggered helplessly backwards, while he himself, missing his footing, fell, as it seemed to her in that moment of horror and anguish, directly beneath the flying wheels.

The whole thing was over and the express out of sight in an instant; but the young man did not rise. As a matter of fact, the train had not touched him, nor had anything worse befallen him than a blow on the back of the head—possibly from a dislodged stone—by which he was

partially stunned. Muriel, however, in her agitation and dismay, took it for granted that he had been killed and flung herself despairingly upon her knees beside his motionless body.

"Oh, my darling!" she cried.

Harry sat up, rubbed his head and laughed a little tremulously. "By Jove!" said he, "that was rather a narrow squeak, wasn't it? Suppose we get out of this before another train comes and makes mincemeat of our remains?"

The suggestion was excellent and the anticlimax a trifle ludicrous; but Muriel, acting promptly upon the one, was as yet too overjoyed and too thankful to be perturbed by the other. As soon as she had assisted her companion who seemed somewhat unsteady on his legs, to a place of safety beneath the trees on the opposite slope she exclaimed anxiously:

"But you are hurt!—you are bleeding dreadfully! Oh, how is it that you were not killed?"

"I can't think!" he answered, laughing again. "Something hit me and knocked me silly for a moment; but it couldn't have been the engine, or my head would hardly be upon my shoulders now. Don't be alarmed; I'm as right as possible. A little bit of a cut, that's all."

He might have added that he had received ample compensation for a far worse wound; but he felt a sort of compunction about taking advantage of what had never been meant to reach his ears, and it was not until the flow of blood had been stopped and he had submitted to have his head tied up with pocket-handkerchiefs that he ventured to look questioningly into Muriel's eyes.

She met his gaze shyly, rather shamefacedly, but without flinching.

"Well," she murmured, "I suppose you heard what I said when I thought you were dead."

He nodded, the colour rising into his cheeks. "Yes, I heard. Did you mean it?"

"Oh," she returned, half-laughing, half-crying, "does one say such things unless one means them? I couldn't have said it, or anything like it—I couldn't have meant it,

or anything like it—ten minutes ago; but now I know, and you know! We needed nothing short of a hideous disaster, it seems, to enlighten us.”

“A hideous disaster!” echoed her exultant lover. “So you call this a hideous disaster, do you? I call it a Heaven-sent miracle!”

By whatever name it might be called—and circumstances, unknown to either of them, rendered it less easy to classify than they supposed—it had the immediate effect of bringing them unmixed happiness.

“Of course I have loved you all along,” Muriel declared, when mutual queries had begun to follow demonstrations which spoke for themselves; “but if you will believe me—will you believe me, I wonder?—I really didn’t know it until just now. I thought I could do very well without you; I was insane enough to think that I couldn’t do without all sorts of worthless things.”

“Are you sure that you can?” Harry anxiously asked. “Are you sure that you won’t regret all you will have to give up?”

“I am quite sure,” she answered, in a voice which carried conviction with it, “that I shall regret nothing so long as I have you. I would gladly live with you in a labourer’s cottage. But we shall not have to do that, and I shall not come to you empty-handed; although I am less of a catch than is generally supposed. I can’t tell you—because he has never told me—who my father’s successor at Leonard’s End is to be; but he has told me, almost in so many words, that I shall not be his successor. Do you mind?”

“Mind!—as if I should be likely to mind! He is welcome, so far as I am concerned, to keep every possession he has in the world to himself, except one. How about that one, though? Won’t he be rather unwilling to hand it over to a nobody like me?”

“You need not feel the least uneasiness on that score,” Muriel smilingly assured her lover; “I can safely promise that any husband whom I may choose will have my father’s approval. He doesn’t, you see, value me quite as highly as you do.”

"That is so extraordinary of him!" Harry could not help remarking. "Not that I quarrel with his insensibility; I am only too glad if it makes him give me all I shall ever ask of him. Still—you are his only child, you know."

"My unpardonable offence consists, perhaps, exactly in my being his only child. I have sometimes thought so, and that if I had a brother he would care for me more than he does. But it doesn't matter now. I don't want his love. I have yours, which is more than enough for me. Oh, I wonder whether you understand in the least what it means to me to love you and be loved by you!"

It may be conjectured that he did not; although, after the manner of reserved persons, she laid her whole heart as bare as she could to him, now that he had won it. All her life long she had been hungering and thirsting for what she had believed to be unattainable. Suddenly, lo and behold! the unattainable had been attained, and perhaps what rejoiced her most was less the discovery of her betrothed's disinterestedness than that of her own. A Heaven-sent miracle had indeed been worked, it seemed to her, through the prosaic medium of a railway train. "And to think that I was upon the verge of dismissing you finally!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"Well, there is no fear of your ever doing that now," Harry contentedly remarked.

"Absolutely none! I can imagine nothing, except your own expressed wish, that could induce me to part with you now."

CHAPTER XXII

Atropos

NOTHING is more infuriating than to be brought within an ace of innocently causing a fellow-creature's death, and the engine-driver of the train which so nearly made an end of Harry Morant and Muriel Leonard had some powerfully-worded remarks to make to his mate respecting the undeserved escape of that heedless couple. Doubtless he would have expressed himself with greater deference, as well as more dismay, had he been a local man, and had he been aware that amongst the passengers behind him were the father of the young lady and the brother of the young gentleman whom he was freely cursing. Leonard and Archie, homeward bound after their nautical experiences, were engaged in conversation when they swept through the cutting, and were thus spared the emotion of witnessing what they might easily have seen if they had been looking out.

"Well, I've applied for the China station," Archie was saying, "and I ought, with any luck, to be sent there. Mother has written to one of the old boys at the Admiralty whom she knows, and I believe he is going to do what he can for me."

"China is a long way off," Leonard remarked.

"Yes; but if you aren't going to get any home leave, you might as well be out there as in the Mediterranean, where there isn't half as much sport to be had and a lot more drill and fuss. Besides, one never knows what may turn up in the far East. I suppose we're pretty well bound to have a row with Russia one of these fine days, aren't we?"

"I see no immediate prospect of such a calamity, and perhaps you will allow me to add that I don't very much want you to be killed by the Russians."

"Oh, well," said the boy, "one must take one's chance of that. Why shouldn't I get a V.C. and come home covered with glory? The fact of the matter is," he continued, "that unless a fellow has lots of brains—which I haven't—or drops in for a bit of active service, the Navy is rather rot. It means spending the best years of your life in more or less beastly places and being shelved when you are still too young to do nothing and too old to take up anything else."

"You aren't very enthusiastic about your profession," Leonard remarked, with a smile and a sigh; "not half as enthusiastic as I should have been in your place. You wouldn't much mind being out of the Navy, would you?"

"Rather not! That is, if I could come into a huge property, as you did, and amuse myself as you might, if you cared about that sort of thing."

Leonard liked to hear him make such speeches, and often led him on to make them. Nevertheless, to adopt a lad of Archie's age and, for the mere selfish pleasure of enjoying his society, to condemn him to an indefinite period of virtual idleness, seemed scarcely prudent, scarcely justifiable. He dallied with the temptation, told himself that he must neither yield to it nor mention it without having at least consulted the boy's mother, and stopped short at hints which might or might not be comprehensible to his young friend's intelligence.

"I might have been a Rear-Admiral to-day, if I had been able to stick to it," he presently resumed. "The worst of being a square peg in a round hole is that one doesn't, and can't, reach any corresponding rank in one's own calling. I have always rather hated mine; though I could make shift to put up with it, perhaps, if I had somebody besides myself to consider."

"Oh, yes, I know," Archie sympathetically agreed—for indeed Leonard and he were by this time intimate enough to have few secrets from one another—"You ought to have had a son, and it's too bad that you haven't."

That'll be all right, though; it will come to much the same thing when Miss Leonard marries, you know."

"I think not. I think my daughter will probably marry some man who has estates of his own and won't require mine."

"I'll tell you what I wish she *would* do," said Archie, with a laugh; "I wish she'd take my brother Harry. Then I should be like one of the family, shouldn't I?—and we could have high old times when I came home on leave."

"I think we may take it as certain that she will not do that."

"Don't you be too sure!" returned the boy, rubbing his hands and chuckling; "I should think twice before I laid odds against it myself. Oh, you don't see things; you haven't noticed. But everybody else has, and in a letter I had from Katie the other day she said she wouldn't be a bit surprised, after all, if"—

He stopped short, startled by Leonard's sudden pallor and stare of horrified amazement. "I say," he stammered penitently, "I'm awfully sorry if you don't like it! What an ass I am! I didn't think you would mind."

Leonard shuddered, feeling like a somnambulist who wakes to find his feet on the verge of a precipice. It was only too true that he had not seen, had not noticed, what any sane man ought to have thought of and guarded against, as at least possible. But he had been so absolutely persuaded in his own mind that Muriel would never bestow her hand or her affections upon the likes of Harry Morant! Even now, after the first momentary shock, he could not, though unable to exonerate himself, believe that there was any real danger.

"You rather took my breath away, that was all," he said, forcing a laugh. "I won't deny that I should be distressed if my daughter had taken a fancy to Harry; there are—well, there are objections to him for which he is not in any way responsible, but which would put him quite out of the question. I hope and think, though, that you and your sister have discovered a mare's nest."

Archie made no rejoinder. He was certain of his facts,

sorry that a scheme which had struck him as agreeable and promising was not to come off, a little sorry also for his elder brother, who seemed destined to disappointment. But he had not yet arrived at the age when disappointments of that nature acquire a tragic importance, nor was his temperament an inquisitive one. With a tact and wisdom worthy of his elders, and seldom practised by them, he simply changed the subject.

Leonard, by the time that he had reached Woodside, whither he drove from the station, in order to restore his young charge to the maternal embraces, had well-nigh shaken off the cold terror which had temporarily taken possession of him. He would, of course, take precautions, should these prove necessary; but he was more and more inclined to rely upon Muriel's unemotional nature and ascertained hankering after worldly prominence. Meanwhile, he had other and pleasanter matters for reflection, which he could not resist tentatively mentioning to Mrs. Morant, who was discovered all by herself beneath a cedar tree on the lawn, and who made him sit down beside her, whilst Archie started off in pursuit of the girls.

"Oh, yes, I shall miss the boy horribly when he is sent to sea," he confessed, in answer to some remark of hers. "So horribly that I sometimes wonder whether it would be a very foolish and unprincipled thing to snatch him away from his profession altogether and plant him down at Leonard's End, in the character of a youth with expectation. What do you think?"

Mrs. Morant dropped her embroidery upon her knees, removing the glasses which she had recently found indispensable, and which were really the only visible betrayal of her years; for she was a well-preserved woman. "What *do* you mean?" she asked.

"Well, not quite as much as I say, perhaps," Leonard answered, laughing a little nervously. "It is just one of those dreams in which solitary men, I daresay, often indulge, and I need not tell you that I have never breathed a word to Archie upon the subject. But—there it is, you see. I am alone, I am rich; it would be the easiest thing

in the world for me, subject to your consent, to provide for Archie without wronging anybody. Only you might, and very likely you would, withhold your consent. Added to which, there is the question of whether it makes for any young man's happiness to be deprived of compulsory work."

Mrs. Morant, whose means were both restricted and precarious, and whose sleep was sometimes interfered with by thoughts of her children's future, pondered in some perplexity the prospect thus unexpectedly held out to her. As an offer, it was not to be lightly rejected; yet the common sense of which she had all her life had a sufficient supply warned her against the danger of sacrificing substances to shadows, and she shrank from committing all that she was asked to commit to the good will and pleasure of one whom she deemed (so little, after all, did she understand the man!) to be capricious, as well as queer. What if she should tire of Archie?—or if the boy should offend him? Nobody knew better than Mrs. Morant that boys and young men are apt to make heavy claims upon the forbearance of their seniors. So she said:

"It is most kind and generous of you, and I don't know how to thank you enough"—

"Good gracious! there's no question of thanks being due to me," Leonard interpolated.

"But I do think that a life of idleness is dangerous in a hundred ways. If, when Archie is a little older, you still feel the same interest in him, and if you were inclined, for instance, to remember him in your will"—

"Oh, that's done; he will get something when I die, in any case. But I may live for ever so long. A short time ago I fancied that there was something wrong with my heart; but the doctors failed to discover any organic mischief."

"Well, you need not apologise," said Mrs. Morant, laughing; "nobody wants you to die."

"I really don't think that anybody, with the possible exception of Archie, wants me to live; but that is not the point. What I mean is that his leaving the Navy would not necessarily entail idleness; for the heir to large estates

can always find plenty to do. Especially when the existing tenant for life asks nothing better than to effect a partial and gradual abdication in his favour. I am astonishing you, I see. Yet nothing short of making him my heir could justify the suggestion that I am submitting to you. It is not really such an extravagant suggestion as it may sound; I have at present no heir, you must remember."

"But, my dear Lord Leonard, you have your daughter!"

"Muriel will be substantially rich, happen what may. I recognise her claims; but I have never recognised, nor has she been led to believe, that succession to the family estates is one of them."

"No? But—why not?" Mrs. Morant asked wonderingly.

She, of all people in the world, should surely have been able to answer that question for herself! But, if she could not or would not, he could hardly enlighten her.

"I have my reasons," he rather drily replied. "Anyhow, you may take it for granted that I shall be succeeded either by your son or by a far-away cousin of mine, with whom I am barely acquainted. Which shall it be?"

"What an unfair question to put to a mother!" protested Mrs. Morant. "It stands to reason that I must wish my sons to do well for themselves; I can't be an impartial judge in such a matter."

Her use of the plural number reminded him that she had two sons, reminding him also, most unpleasantly, of what he had almost contrived to forget. Could she be so oblivious of the past as to cherish in her heart a project of which the bare idea ought to have horrified her as much as it had him? After staring at her for a moment in frowning interrogation, he made up his mind to say point-blank:

"It has occurred to me—or rather, the notion has been insinuated to me—that your eldest boy has an admiration for Muriel. I trust that that is a false alarm."

"I think everybody must admire your daughter," answered Mrs. Morant, who in all honesty did not under-

stand her companion's sudden and stern change of tone; "if my poor Harry were one of her victims, it would not be so very surprising, would it? I don't say that he is, and of course I know that he cannot be what you would consider a suitable match for her"—

"An impossible match!" interrupted Leonard almost fiercely—"an utterly impossible match!"

Mrs. Morant was a little affronted. If she had a favourite amongst her children, it was her firstborn, and she really could not see why, if Archie was deemed worthy of becoming Lord Leonard's heir, his elder brother should be scouted in the capacity of that eccentric nobleman's son-in-law. She took her revenge by remarking coldly that, in that case, there was of course no more to be said, and by reverting to the original subject of discussion, with regard to which she showed a less amenable spirit than before.

"My feeling about it," she presently said, "is that, for the present anyhow, Archie had better be left to pursue the career which he has hardly begun. I gather that you want me to give him up to you altogether, which I am naturally disinclined to do, and although I should be sorry to stand in his light, I am not convinced that he would be a gainer in the long run by being taken away from his own family and converted into a nominal heir who, from the nature of the circumstances, must always be liable to find himself disinherited. Then, too—frivolous as such an objection may seem to you—I can't help fearing that the kind of existence that you propose might be a little dull for him."

Leonard did not think that objection frivolous. It was, indeed, precisely the objection to which he himself was most alive, and, notwithstanding the complete mutual satisfaction with which he and Archie had hitherto consorted together, he was aware that there is a vast difference between holiday times and the normal condition of things. He was, moreover, as he had always been, very easily snubbed, very ready to withdraw into his shell at a hint.

"Probably you are right," he concluded; "it would be

needless, and it might prove disastrous, to make any immediate change. Archie's eventual acquisition of my estates does not, after all, depend upon his abandoning his profession at once; the idea of his doing so was only the dream of a lonely man—a rather selfish one, no doubt. I am sure I may depend upon you to say nothing about it."

He reached home, not long afterwards, to find Muriel laboriously entertaining a couple of dowagers, who seemed disinclined to go and dress for dinner, notwithstanding the summons of a warning gong and their hostess's visible anxiety to get rid of them. Other guests—young men and maidens for the most part—were hanging about and gradually dispersing. The house appeared to be pretty well filled; but indeed it seldom was anything else; for its owner, as has been mentioned, was conditionally hospitable. He was also invariably courteous, if a trifle distant in his manner, and he now walked round, saying something civil to everybody, until the room emptied itself. Then, with a sigh of relief, Muriel exclaimed:

"This just gives me time to tell you something which you had better be told before dinner! You will be glad to hear that I am going to be married at last."

It may safely be said that there had never until then been a day on which he would not have been glad to receive this preliminary announcement or would have felt any misgivings with regard to the sequel; but now he drew in his breath sharply, while his eyes became dilated with alarm.

"You are going to be married!" he echoed. "To whom?"

"You would never guess," answered Muriel, whose face and voice struck him as oddly softened; "you think, I know, that I should have married before this if I had not wanted to secure some exceptionally brilliant personage for a husband. You are quite right; that is exactly what I did want. But I suppose I must be a greater fool than either you or I supposed; for I have accepted Harry Morant for the simple and absurd reason that I love him."

Her father's air of blank dismay took her by surprise. She knew that nobody cared less than he did about social prominence, she was aware (for she had read his poems and admired some of them, though she never told him so) that he was at heart a good deal of a sentimentalist, and she had counted upon his sympathy. Twice he opened his lips; but, as no word proceeded from them, she said interrogatively at last:

"You don't approve?"

"I am very sorry," answered Leonard rather hoarsely, "to be compelled to tell you that I do not. I must go further than that and add that I cannot allow you to marry young Morant."

The girl's face hardened and her chin thrust itself slightly forward. "But I am going to marry him," she announced, in a quiet, resolute voice.

Leonard shook his head. "No, my dear Muriel, you are not going to do that; for the thing cannot be. You will naturally and reasonably ask why it cannot be; but the only reply that I have it in my power to give you is that there is a reason and a conclusive one. Will you accept my word for that?"

"Certainly not without hearing the reason."

"Not even if I assure you upon my honour that it exists, that you could not help recognising it as conclusive and that I only withhold it in order to spare you unnecessary pain?"

"No, not even upon the strength of that assurance. How can you tell that I should recognise it as conclusive? I don't believe I should. One thinks of the few obstacles which are generally considered to be more or less insuperable—some inherited disease, some taint of insanity in his family, some entanglement of his which has come to your ears, probably in a perverted form? None of these things would stop me."

Leonard sighed, he could not but feel that the girl had every right to insist upon an explanation; yet—what was he to do, save silently and obstinately to forbid the banns? For the moment, at any rate, he could do no more, since there was not time.

“We must talk it over,” he said. “Come to me in my room when all these people have gone to bed, and I will try to convince you that I only thwart you because I have absolutely no choice. You will believe, at any rate, that I should very much prefer to let you have your own way and that I would not for the world prevent you from making a marriage of affection, if I could help it.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Adieu, Love

THE room on the ground floor where the late Mrs. Leonard had of yore been wont to transact business connected with the management of the estate, and which was now utilised by her son for the same purpose, as well as for that of literary composition, was very seldom entered by Muriel. She crossed its threshold with a beating heart but a composed countenance, shortly before midnight, not having until then been able to shake off the more dilatory of her guests. What was she about to hear? Something serious, something distressing, no doubt; yet surely nothing that could prevail upon her to break with the only man in the world who had won her love! All through the long evening her imagination had been busy; but it had suggested to her no circumstance or chain of circumstances which must of necessity entail such a catastrophe as that. So, although she was apprehensive, she was determined, while her father, whom she found pacing restlessly to and fro, with an unlighted cigar between his lips, gave her the impression of being at least equally nervous and a good deal less resolute.

This, however, was a mistake. He also had for some hours past been mentally reviewing a cruel situation in all its aspects, and his duty was only too inexorably clear to him. After placing a chair for her, he began, without preface:

"Let me admit at once that you are entitled, if you insist upon it, to be told the whole truth; but let me repeat that the only effect of your being told will be to make you more unhappy than you are, and to leave you as powerless to obtain what you want as I am to give it to you. Can

you not make up your mind to believe this, and simply to intimate to young Morant that I forbid your engagement?"

Muriel made a decisive gesture of negation. "I believe that you are anxious to spare me," she answered, "but, of course, I insist upon hearing everything. Would not you yourself do the same in my place?"

"I suppose I should. Yes—since you ask me—I am sure I should. There is no help for it, then; all I can do is tell you the truth as quickly and curtly as I can; for such things cannot be broken gently. You have always been led to believe me a widower; but that is not the case. Your mother is still alive, although she ceased to be my wife not long after your birth, when her conduct compelled me to divorce her. The immediate cause of this was her elopement with an actor, under whose protection she only remained for a short time; but I might, if I had chosen, have released myself from her before that, owing to other affairs of a similar nature, in one of which Mrs. Morant's late husband played a prominent part. Now do you begin to understand?"

"I think you had better go on," answered Muriel firmly.

"Yes, I had better go on. What has to be said must be said, however much it may hurt us both. I must say that it has always been impossible to me to believe that you are my daughter, and I must say that there are, unhappily, the strongest reasons for believing that Harry Morant's father was also your father. Now you know the worst; and you will see that it could hardly be worse."

It could indeed hardly be worse; but—had there been any need for it to be so terribly bad? This was the question which Muriel, rising abruptly and drawing nearer to the pallid man whose merciless concision of statement left her, as it had been intended to do, without a vestige of hope, could not refrain from putting to him by implication.

"And, knowing all this," she exclaimed, "you did not even think yourself bound to warn me!"

Leonard hung his head. "I did not," he confessed;

"I never until this day suspected that there could be any danger. And of course nothing short of obvious danger could have persuaded me to speak to you as I have just been speaking."

"So you could not be brought to face a disagreeable task by anything short of obvious danger? Well may you say that you have never been able to look upon me as your daughter! I have certainly found it rather difficult at times to believe that you could be my father; but this explains all. I wonder whether it will astonish you very much to be told that, in spite of your invariable kindness and liberality, I consider that I have been most heartlessly used."

The case, Leonard felt, was too tragic for vain recriminations. He had not been affectionate, nor had she; the blame might lie with him or with her or with both of them; but, had they been ever so much attached to one another, they could not have converted themselves into what they were not.

"Do you think," he asked, "that it would have been kinder to make you acquainted with the facts? In the eyes of the law you are my daughter; it would be practically impossible for me to prove the contrary, even if I wished to do so. I have not at any time wished to do so; my wish was to keep you in ignorance of disgraces and humiliations with which you individually had nothing to do, and, to the best of my belief, there was but one imaginable event which would force me to enlighten you. That event has now occurred. It is"—he paused for an instant, sighed and concluded simply, "It is rather bad luck."

His plea, so far as it went, was plausible enough; yet it did not touch the special grievance of which Muriel deemed herself entitled to complain.

"Although you are not my father," said she, "you have chosen to accept the position of being my father. That may have been generous of you, and perhaps, now that I understand so well why you have never cared for me, I ought to be all the more grateful to you. But does it not strike you that even a fictitious father might have

averted what you yourself call the one imaginable event that could have brought this misery to pass? Could you not at the outset—or later, when you must have noticed how often Harry Morant was here—have given me a word of caution against becoming too fond of him?"

That, Leonard might have retorted, would have been a very good way of defeating his own end; for the least skilled observer of feminine character must be aware of the invariable result produced by such warnings, and Muriel was not amenable to guidance. But he was too honest to make false excuses for himself.

"Either so or otherwise, I ought undoubtedly to have averted the catastrophe," he confessed, "and I can no more forgive myself than I can expect you to forgive me. But the truth, extraordinary as it may seem, is just what I have already told you. I never until to-day suspected the existence of the danger."

The girl smiled a little bitterly. "And, as I have already told you, there could hardly be a stronger proof of your inability to look upon me as your daughter."

He made no reply, and for what seemed like quite a long time they stood, facing one another, in silence. At length Muriel resumed—

"I suppose you do not wish me to give Harry my real reason for breaking my word?"

"I think that, for everybody's sake, it would be better not."

"Yes; so do I. There is nothing to be gained by making a number of people miserable when one—or, at the outside, two—will suffice. Very likely he won't suffer long; for he will be obliged to think me such a wretch! There is one thing which I did not mention to you, and which is of no great consequence now; though it makes my part somewhat more difficult to play. He nearly lost his life this afternoon in saving mine."

She briefly described the episode to which she referred, exclaiming, in conclusion, "Ah, what a thousand pities it is that he kept his presence of mind! A couple of seconds more would have relieved him and you and the world of a worse than superfluous being! If I had only

known then what I know now, I don't think even Harry's promptitude and activity would have been rewarded by success!"

Leonard groaned. Full of sorrow and sympathy and remorse though he was, he knew not what to say or do, being so sensible that any demonstration on his part must appear more or less like a mockery to the unfortunate girl. His face and his silence were perhaps eloquent; for she laid the tips of her fingers upon his arm for a moment, saying, with a rather rueful smile:

"Oh, I know you are sorry, and I know you would be glad to do anything that you could for me. I can't help wishing that you had spoken out long ago; because then I should have understood many things which have been a puzzle to me, and—and I daresay we should have been better friends. Yet if I had been you, I should very likely have acted as you have done. It must have been a horrible dilemma for you from first to last."

"You would not have been so blind or so careless as I have been lately," Leonard answered; "there is no excuse for my recent behaviour and I attempt none. But I still believe that I did right in concealing from you what, so far as I could foresee, there would never be any need for you to hear. Well—words are vain. If in the future I should be able to make some sort of amends to you"—

"You will be able to do that," Muriel interrupted, "by never again alluding to what is past and done with. What has happened may or may not have been inevitable; but at any rate it has happened, and all we can do is to put a good face upon it. Don't make yourself miserable on my account; with a little courage, I shall pull through. Only I must not be offered compensations just yet, please."

To Lord Leonard's very full record of the above conversation in his diary is appended the following characteristic comment:—

"I felt that I ought to love her as much for her unselfishness and forbearance as I admired her for her pluck; yet I could get no further than pitying her from the bottom of my heart and cursing myself for my amazing heedlessness. I could not wish that she were really my

daughter; I could not care for her half as much as I do for Archie, whom I am not even to be allowed to adopt, it seems. There are depths of rancour and injustice in us—in me, anyhow—which it is not agreeable to contemplate. I suppose the true truth is that, whoever her father may have been, I can't forget who her mother was."

She had not very much in common with her mother. It was a good deal more like Leonard himself than like the essentially egotistical Lily of long ago to compose such a letter as she did before going to bed. There were—so she told herself—two things which it behooved her to bear in mind: she must make Harry understand that all was irrevocably at an end between them, and she must do this without giving more pain to him and others than was inseparable from that intimation.

"You will probably think me a despicable coward," she therefore wrote, "when I tell you that I cannot, after all, be your wife. But what you may think of me is less important than it is that you should accept this as my deliberate and final decision. Perhaps I was under the influence of a nervous shock and some natural agitation this afternoon; perhaps, now that I can look at the future in cold blood, I shrink from sacrifices which I hastily declared that I was ready to incur; perhaps I do not really love you as a wife ought to love her husband; perhaps—But there are endless possibilities for you to choose from, and if I were to make this note as long as I mean it to be short, the upshot would be the same. I am not going to marry you; nor will anything that you can do or say move me from that determination. So it is best, I think, to attempt no excuses, no explanations. I hope you will carry out your original intention of going away at once. I should like to add that I hope we may meet again before very long as friends; but that must be for you to decide. In spite of what you said to-day, we are sure to meet again, if only because of my father's intimacy with Mrs. Morant and your younger brother; of course, though, it will not be necessary for us, unless you wish it, to do more than exchange a few words when we come across one an-

other. I shall always remember that you saved my life; but I cannot, and do not, expect you to think that it was worth the risk that you ran in saving it."

That missive, Muriel thought, on reading it over, with a heart full of sorrow and compunction, should be base, cynical, brutal enough to choke off anybody! It was, in fact, a little too palpable so to hit the mark, and Harry, when it was delivered to him by a groom from Leonard's End early the next morning, detected its insincerity at once. Muriel might, and doubtless did, wish to throw him over; but if the motives at which she hinted had been her true motives, she would have avowed them and tried to soften them down. What she was obviously trying to do was to make him hate or despise her, a course which jilts are not wont to adopt. It was consequently as clear as daylight that something quite subversive must have occurred after he had taken leave of her, and he naturally resolved to discover what that something was.

Late that afternoon, accordingly (for he knew better than to present himself early and be informed Miss Leonard had gone out driving), he was ushered into the long saloon where, as he had foreseen, Muriel was drinking tea with various ladies. His intention of sitting those ladies out was made so manifest that they good-naturedly left the field clear for him after saying some flattering things respecting his fine conduct of the previous day and informing themselves as to the condition of his plastered head.

"You told your friends about our adventure, then," he remarked, as soon as the last of them had vanished.

"I couldn't help it," Muriel replied; "I had to account to my maid for a torn skirt and a muddy jacket, and I remembered also that you would have to account to your people for your blood-stained appearance. Besides, there was no occasion for making mysteries."

She looked rather pale and tired, he noticed; but she seemed to be perfectly self-possessed, and she had received him without any sign of surprise or agitation.

"Why have you come?" she asked presently.

"You can't need to be told why," he answered; "you

can't have expected me to believe what you tried to make me believe in your letter."

"Yes; that is what I expected. And you will have to believe it, because I have nothing to add to what I wrote."

The young man laid his hand gently, but firmly, upon her wrist. "Muriel," said he, "no assertion of yours, spoken or written, would make me believe that you did not love me yesterday afternoon. If you have now made up your mind not to marry me, it is not because you don't love me, but for some other reason, and I have a right to demand that reason."

"I don't dispute your right; but I suppose we must all sometimes submit to be wronged. Think what you please of me; but let me assure you that attempting to drive me into a corner is a sheer waste of time. If you were to stay here until midnight you would get no more out of me than a repetition of the statement that I will never be your wife."

"But why? Surely you must see that it is indispensable to give me *some* reason, good, bad or indifferent! Tell me at least this—were you or were you not speaking the truth when you said that you loved me?"

She shook her head. "I can answer no more questions."

"Is it that Lord Leonard objects?"

She remained silent, and he did not press that query, which he felt, indeed, to be a superfluous one. She was not likely to have been cowed by opposition on her father's part, nor, if she had been, would she have hesitated to say so. But he persisted with a string of interrogations, to all of which she turned a deaf ear. Had he unwittingly offended her? Had anybody calumniated against him? Was it comparative poverty that she feared? Exasperated at length by the inexorable muteness to which she had recourse as to her only safe refuge, he exclaimed:

"Do you know what you force me to think? That, whatever may be your reason, you are ashamed of it!"

"I have told you already," said Muriel, "that you must think what you please. But perhaps, if I ought to be

ashamed of myself, you also ought to be ashamed of refusing to take what is, and is meant to be, an unceremonious dismissal."

For the first time, her voice shook a little; but he was too angry and too much hurt to notice that slight token of weakness.

"Perhaps I ought," he returned, starting up. "So be it, then! I shall be off to Dorsetshire to-morrow morning, and I shall do my very best to forget you as soon as I possibly can, Miss Leonard." He accomplished his exit with somewhat more dignity than he would have done had he proclaimed, as he was tempted to do, his intention of going straight to the deuce, and Muriel, after his departure, sat for some minutes motionless, dry-eyed, despairing.

Oh, it would not take him very long to forget her; assuredly not the lifetime that she would require to forget him. The only human being whom she had ever loved; the only one, perhaps, who had ever really loved her; the only one—oh, cruel, hideous, sickening thought!—whom it was a sin against the laws of God and man for her to love!

CHAPTER XXIV

Mrs. Vane

LEONARD, who had promised to take Archie out for a ride that afternoon, returned home shortly before the dinner hour, having left his young friend under the impression that he had, for some unexplained reason or other, "got the hump." He was in truth in a sorrowful and self-accusing mood, which was not lightened when he encountered Muriel on the staircase and heard from her that she had carried out his instructions respecting Harry.

"I wrote him a note," was her succinct account of what had taken place; "but, as that was not enough for him, he came here and—I gave him his despatch as mercifully as I could."

"You did not tell him the actual facts?"

"Of course not. I took what seemed to me to be the kindest method that there was to take by making him thoroughly angry and disgusted. I simply threw him over, and left him to draw his own conclusions. One of them will soon be, if it is not already, that he is well rid of me."

Leonard bit his lips and frowned. "It is very hard upon you," he said.

"Yes; but I am accustomed to that. Many things, and some people, have been hard upon me. It couldn't have been otherwise, perhaps. Not until quite lately, anyhow. There is no use in talking about it, though; so we won't talk about it, please."

There was no use in talking about it, nor could anything now be done to atone for the recent criminal negligence to which she had made allusion; but that the whole

burden of punishment for sins of which she was altogether innocent had fallen upon her shoulders was beyond question, and if Leonard deserved to spend a miserable evening and night, he had his deserts. Although it was no fault of his that she could not marry young Morant, it was in a great measure, if not entirely, his fault that she had fallen in love with a man whom it was impossible for her to marry. So a long succession of sleepless hours brought him to the next morning, and in the course of that morning came a somewhat agitated note from Mrs. Morant to beg that he would look in upon her during the day.

He obeyed the summons, as in duty bound, notwithstanding a strong and painful conviction that he was going to be forced to say what he would greatly prefer to leave unsaid, and Mrs. Morant's first words fully confirmed his foreboding.

"Dear Lord Leonard," she began, "I think we are old friends enough to be quite candid with one another, are we not?"

"And to spare one another the ordeal of needless candour," he pleaded.

"I am afraid I don't understand you; I am afraid I must ask you to have patience with me if I say things which you may consider needless. You remember what I told you—or didn't quite tell you—about poor Harry, and of course you know that he proposed to your daughter that same day and was accepted. I suppose you know, too, that yesterday she broke off the engagement without accounting in any way for her sudden change of front, and"—

"Excuse me," interposed Leonard, "but there was no engagement. There could be none without my assent, could there?"

"Ah, exactly! Then, although she would not say so, it is you who refuse, not she. I felt sure that that must be the case, and I can't think that you will mind my asking you why you refuse."

"Oh, I mind! But I will answer, if you insist. Yes, you are quite right; it was I who had no choice but to

forbid an impossible alliance. The strange thing is that you do not see its impossibility."

Mrs. Morant shook her head. "I see, of course, that Harry has neither the rank nor the wealth that you are entitled to look for in your future son-in-law; but when I remember the past, it does not seem to me that you have ever been much influenced by such considerations."

"There are other considerations connected with the past—can you have forgotten them?—which inevitably influence me. I hate to remind you of them; I hated still more having to reveal them to poor Muriel, who until yesterday believed herself to be what she is not; but, as I say, I had and have no choice. She is not, unhappily, my own daughter, and the date of her birth makes her parentage, I fear, almost a matter of uncertainty. Do you see now why there is just one person in the world whom she has to be prevented from marrying, even at the cost of acquainting her with what I had hoped she might never hear?"

"Oh!—but how horrible!" gasped Mrs. Morant, in dismay.

"It is horrible, and I have been greatly to blame. Nevertheless, you will recognise that I was compelled to speak out. Muriel did not feel that we were compelled to speak out to your son, and, painful as it must have been to her to leave him under a false impression, I think that, upon the whole, she has adopted the best and wisest course."

"Oh, poor, *poor* girl!"

"We are all to be pitied, I suppose; though I merit less compassion than my fellow-sufferers, because I ought to have taken precautions which I neglected." He sighed and resumed, after a pause, "It only shows the invariable folly and futility of attempting to stifle the truth. Yet it would have been a cruel thing to tell her the truth! Cruel, and, as it seemed, uncalled-for. Ought I, do you think, to have told her as soon as she was old enough to understand? Naturally, I could not have done so during her childhood."

Mrs. Morant shook her head sorrowfully. "I can't say

what you ought to have done; very likely I should have acted as you did. But—are you quite certain of your facts? Did—did your wife ever acknowledge her guilt?”

“Some time before she left me,” Leonard answered, “my wife made every imaginable acknowledgment. She became quite reckless, and I fancy that she enjoyed humiliating me. She ran away at last, as you know, with a good-looking actor, whose stage name was Vane; I have forgotten his real name. The divorce followed, as a matter of course, and, equally as a matter of course, the custody of the child was assigned to me.”

“Yes; but what I mean is, did she ever admit in so many words that the child was—my husband’s child?”

“I cannot, at this distance of time, state positively that she ever did; but she was undoubtedly aware that such was my belief, and she did not pretend that the child was mine. The fact—the notorious fact—is that your husband was one amongst many.”

“Ah!” cried Mrs. Morant, clutching eagerly at that straw, “then it is possible, after all, you, see, that you have been mistaken.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “It is possible; I do not think it likely. And, in any case, there is a doubt—or rather a probability—which we must regard as fatal.”

“I can’t quite agree with you there. Surely the doubt or the probability, whichever you choose to call it, ought to be converted into a certainty before two innocent persons are made the victims of it! Are there no means of arriving at certainty?”

Leonard stroked his chin. “I could ask Muriel’s mother,” he answered slowly; “I know, or at least I can easily ascertain, where she is to be found. But I should not myself be disposed to accept any statement of hers upon the subject as conclusive.”

“What would she gain by a false statement? What harm, anyhow, would be done by allowing her the chance of making a true one? It seems to me that, as things have fallen out, you ought, for everybody’s sake, to give her that chance.”

“Well—if you think so.”

"I do most decidedly think so," Mrs. Morant declared. "I won't speak of the slur upon my poor husband's memory"—

Leonard interrupted her with a short, unmirthful laugh. "Oh, come!"

"No," she resumed, her colour rising slightly, "I will say nothing about that, although something might be said, and although, for all your generosity, which I have always acknowledged, I don't think you ever quite did him justice. But he is dead and gone, and it does not matter now. What does matter a great deal is that you should not, through unintentional injustice, spoil two young lives."

"Good heavens!—what risks you are prepared to take with a light heart!"

"I am not light-hearted," Mrs. Morant returned; "nor, of course, are you. But the difference between us is that I love my son, and that nothing could make my heart heavier than to see him unhappy. You would understand, perhaps, if you had children of your own."

"I believe I understand. I have Archie; though I must not call him my own."

"Ah, there it is! You have taken this extraordinary fancy for Archie. May it not be just because you are so anxious to treat Archie as your son that you are so ready to disown and disinherit the girl who is, after, all your presumptive daughter?"

There was enough of truth in that rather unpleasant accusation to make Leonard wince; but he kept within the strict limits of truth when he answered:

"I have not disowned Muriel, and I have no intention of doing so. As for disinheriting her, I had decided long before I saw Archie against constituting her my sole heiress. However, I will see Mrs. Vane, who still calls herself by that name, and I will let you know the results of the interview. In the meantime, I hope you will say nothing which might have the effect of encouraging vain hopes on your son's part."

"Of course I shall say nothing to him. Indeed, I cannot; for he left us this morning."

"So much the better. Personally, I do not expect Mrs. Vane to take the trouble of meeting me with a denial, and, as I tell you, I should have some difficulty in believing her if she did. Still, I admit that we ought to be as sure as it is possible to be."

He took away with him the impression—a correct one, very likely—that Mrs. Morant, who had been so excellent a wife, was an equally excellent mother, but that she had an amenable conscience. Women, he reflected, are for the most part like that. They want all manner of things, some good, some bad; but what they seldom want, and never for its own sake, is the truth. He, for his part, had wanted all his life to get at the truth, and had learnt by that time that nothing is more difficult to obtain. He could scarcely, at any rate, anticipate hearing it from the lady whom it had now become his most distasteful duty to interrogate.

There was, however, no more difficulty about interrogating her than was involved in going up to London on the ensuing day and calling at a house in Belgrave Road, with the number of which he was well acquainted. He was acquainted with Mrs. Vane's address for the simple reason that he had not chosen to let the woman starve, and that his lawyers, who were instructed to make periodical anonymous payments to her bankers, had during many years been in the habit of formally reporting to him that the recipient of his bounty was still alive. Whether she suspected him or not of being her benefactor he did not know, nor had he once set eyes on her since the day when he had seen her quit the Divorce Court, smiling, impudent, gaily attired and equivocally escorted. Echoes of her subsequent career—of her speedy desertion by the co-respondent, of various adventures, more or less sordid, terminating in the destitution which he had seen fit to relieve—had come to his ears; but latterly, so far as he was aware, she had conducted herself with decency. She had, in fact, long ago reached an age at which those of her sex who do not happen to take to drink have few opportunities of doing otherwise.

Mrs. Vane, he was informed by the grubby caretaker

who answered his ring, was out of town and was not expected home before November : her letters were forwarded to the Hôtel Métropole at Brighton. Thither Leonard accordingly journeyed by a late train, not altogether sorry that he was thus enabled to give an air of fortuity to the meeting which he could not shirk, and there, after he had dined, he recognised, reclining in a rocking-chair near the principal entrance, the object of his search. He probably would not have recognised her, had he not been on the look-out ; for time had treated her with even less leniency than it had him. Her figure was shapeless ; her cheeks were withered, baggy and powdered ; her ruddy locks had been replaced by a wig of the same hue which lacked all plausibility, and she had an indescribable appearance of rakish respectability which in no way recalled the Lily of an expired epoch. But she knew him as soon as he accosted her, and said, in accents of grave, somewhat pained surprise :

"It is both humbling and consoling to be noticed by you, Lord Leonard."

"The years," answered Leonard, seating himself beside her, "bring consolations and humiliations to most of us, I suppose."

"And pardon, I would fain hope, to some of us," Mrs. Vane sighed. "I have been too great a sinner to expect forgiveness from my fellow-sinners ; yet I have, I am thankful to say, found mercy and peace at a higher tribunal than I can be called upon to face here below, and such reparation as it is in my power to make for all the evil that I have done in the past I am endeavouring to make in the present."

Leonard glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and wondered whether she was laughing at him or not. She relieved him of doubt by diving into her pocket and producing a sheaf of printed leaflets.

"Papers," said she, "relating to the great and good work in which I am privileged to take a modest part. You will see that we are in urgent need of fresh subscribers, and I cannot but feel that my own sad history specially

fits me to plead on behalf of an undertaking which has for its object to seek and to save"—

"I am sure," broke in Leonard hurriedly, "that the undertaking is worthy of support, and I shall be happy to subscribe five pounds. But when you speak of reparation, may I assume that you use the term in an individual as well as in a general sense? Because, if so, and if you think that you owe any to me, you will perhaps oblige me by answering a question which nobody else can answer. Not to beat about the bush, I want you to tell me who is the father of my reputed daughter Muriel."

Mrs. Vane sighed tempestuously. "Lord Leonard," she groaned, "you remind me that I have been a most miserable sinner!"

"I am really sorry to be obliged to remind you of anything so distressing; but I have reasons, which I will explain presently, for being particularly anxious to ascertain whether Muriel is the daughter of my late friend Morant or not."

"Morant?" repeated Mrs. Vane vaguely. And then, with more animation, "Ah, yes, to be sure! He was a very bad man—very bad indeed—and he behaved most abominably to me! So he is dead, is he? I trust that time was given him for repentance before he was taken. You used, of course, to be much attached to his wife, who was—but no matter! Can it be that you are still attached to her and that you still wish to marry her?"

"No; but her son wishes to marry my supposed daughter, and it has thus become a matter of necessity for me to find out who my supposed daughter is."

He gave a succinct narrative of the circumstances and wound up by repeating his query. "Not," he observed, "that it is possible for me to entertain much uncertainty upon the subject myself; but, since we have met, it is perhaps only just that I should obtain confirmation from you."

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Vane, "they can marry if they want to marry. I am able to assure you that Mr. Morant was not what you think he was."

"But it seems to me that he must have been! I wonder whether you realise what a calamity you bring within the range of possible events by giving me that assurance."

"I am a Christian woman to-day, whatever I may have been in days gone by," Mrs. Vane solemnly declared. "Is it to be supposed that I should burden my conscience with another crime for the sake of gratifying people whom I have so little reason to love?"

"One would think not. At the same time, I cannot but draw obvious deductions from the date of Muriel's birth."

"Bless the man!" exclaimed Mrs. Vane impatiently; "it is precisely that date which, if you knew what you were talking about, would make you independent of any statements of mine. However, you can please yourself about believing or disbelieving me; I remember now that it was your invariable rule to disbelieve me—which is always such a mistake! For my own part, I don't in the least care whether you set me down as a liar or not. And I must say," she added, recollecting herself and assuming a more dignified tone, "that this conversation strikes me as most indelicate."

"I apologise," said Leonard; "its importance must be the excuse for its indelicacy. May I plead the same excuse for putting one more question to you? If Morant was not the girl's father, who in the world was?"

"Lord Leonard," answered Mrs. Vane, sighing heavily, "you remind me, rather cruelly and needlessly, I think, of what I once was. You know who by the law of the land your daughter's father is, and I should imagine, from what you began by saying, that you ask for nothing better than to acquiesce in the law's decision. If, for some reason best known to yourself, you wish to prevent this marriage, I cannot give you the assistance which you perhaps expected. Were I at this moment to be put upon my oath, or were I to find myself, as I must ere long, upon my death-bed, I should only be able to repeat what I have affirmed. My daughter cannot be the late Mr. Morant's daughter and she may be yours. I do not say that she is not."

He could obtain nothing further from her, and, after

she had exhorted him at some length to save his soul alive by setting his affections on things above, he handed her the promised five-pound note and wished her good evening. She mentioned incidentally that "through the kindness of friends" she had been placed in possession of a modest competence, and he was rather glad to gather that she did not guess who those "friends" were. He was also glad to have been furnished with evidence which Mrs. Morant and Muriel would doubtless welcome as convincing; but he did not and could not rejoice over the attitude which seemed forced upon him of having to partially disinherit the latter upon grounds which would scarcely bear investigation.

CHAPTER XXV

Standing Alone

LEONARD was preparing for an early start from Brighton the next morning when he received a message from Mrs. Vane to the effect that she would be greatly obliged by the favour of a few minutes' interview. He could, of course, do no less than comply with a request which he was not particularly eager to grant, and he was presently ushered into a small sitting-room, where his former wife, arrayed in a rather dingy tea-gown and looking very old indeed by the broad light of day, awaited him.

"I heard that you were leaving," she began, "and I wish, before you go, to add just a few words to our conversation of last night. On thinking things over, I feel sure that we did not meet, as at first I supposed we had, by mere chance and that you tracked me to this place with the deliberate intention of asking me the question which I have answered."

Leonard silently inclined his head.

"You admit that? Perhaps you will also admit that I have disappointed you?"

"No; on the contrary, your statement, if authentic, will be the means of taking a great weight off my mind."

"Oh, you are disappointed, Lord Leonard. You hate my daughter because she is my daughter, and you wish—it is, after all, easy enough to guess what you wish—to have a good excuse for refusing her her rights. As for the truth of my statement, you had better refer the matter to Mrs. Morant, who certainly cannot wish to expose her son to anything so terrible as the risk which you

affect to dread, and who must know as well as anybody that such a risk does not exist. But you will say that, be that as it may, my daughter is not yours."

"You yourself, I gather, do not go the length of asserting that she is."

"That is at least honest of me, don't you thing so? I wonder whether you will believe that I am honest when I implore you not to visit my sins upon her. You hate her, of course"—

"Indeed I do not," Leonard interpolated.

"Oh, yes, you hate her as you hated me; though with less reason, I should imagine. Now, I have not one word to say for myself, except that you wearied me and infuriated me to that extent by your contemptuous tolerance that at last I would have run away with a chimney-sweep rather than continue to live with you. But, wicked as I was, and as you probably think that I still am, I am not absolutely devoid of all natural affection, and if it were possible for me to see my poor girl"—

Her voice suddenly broke, and there were real tears in her sunken eyes.

"I am sorry," said Leonard, in his cold, grave way, "that that is not possible."

"It is neither possible nor desirable; pray, do not suppose that I am suggesting it. But I will ask you to give her her mother's love and to beg her to forgive me, if she can. You might add, but I don't suppose you will, that she has her mother's heartfelt sympathy."

"I will deliver any message to her with which you may intrust me," Leonard said.

"Thank you. Tell her, then, that nobody can appreciate more fully than I what she must have had to endure. Lord Leonard, you pride yourself, I know, upon being a just man, and I can well believe that you have treated her with what you consider justice; but let me remind you that, since you have not married again—why didn't you?—she remains in the eyes of the world your only child, and that you will put a public insult upon her by cutting her off with a mere legacy, even though it should be a handsome one. From all you said last night, it is

pretty clear that such is your intention, and I ask you whether it is either just or generous to avenge yourself upon me after that fashion."

Lord Leonard's diary, which gives a *verbatim* report of the foregoing colloquy, sums up the remainder of it as follows:

"She went on in the same strain for some minutes, resorting to numerous citations from the Old Testament (not by the way, quite the best authority that could have been quoted in support of her thesis), and to what extent, if any, she was sincere I really do not know. Perhaps she had an eye upon the future and saw herself returning to Leonard's End, after my demise, in a maternal and maternal-in-law capacity; perhaps her emotions were genuinely stirred; her religion, I should think, must be more or less genuine, though it is impossible to tell. What vexed me then and for a good many hours afterwards was that she did not seem to be so very far wrong in accusing me of injustice. I might, I suppose, have won Muriel's affection if I had tried very hard. I certainly have not won it, nor can I pretend to have tried much since her childhood. I don't, of course, admit that I 'put a public insult upon her' by bequeathing my landed property to somebody else; I consider that I am absolutely within my right in so deciding. Yet I appear to stand alone in taking that view. Well, I am accustomed, or ought to be by this time, to standing alone."

This extract was written, no doubt, on the evening of the day to which it refers, which explains the audible sigh breathed in its concluding sentences. For Leonard, on reaching his journey's end, drove straight to Woodside, thinking it best to confer with Mrs. Morant before seeing Muriel; and from Mrs. Morant he obtained only such comfort as is to be derived from the spectacle of a reassured and joyous fellow-creature.

"Oh, but there isn't the shadow of a doubt about the matter!" she exclaimed, as soon as he had unfolded his tale. "Muriel's birthday, you tell me, is on the tenth of February, and why on earth you did not tell me so before I am at a loss to imagine! If only you had, we might

all of us have been spared so much wretchedness! I don't want to say anything disagreeable, now that the question is happily set at rest; but I can't help feeling that you have been misled by your inveterate determination always to believe the worst of my poor husband."

Against that somewhat fantastic charge Leonard did not deem it worth while to defend himself; he only remarked: "Your late husband's acquittal, if he must be acquitted, does not, you must remember, exonerate my former wife."

"Well, no," Mrs. Morant agreed; "I suppose it doesn't. But—does that so very much signify?"

"I can scarcely say. You will write to your son Harry at once, I presume?"

"Oh, I shall telegraph! That is, if you don't object."

"I don't object; but it is upon the cards that he may. It is evident now, you see, that he will have to be told everything, and why should we take it for granted that he will relish the idea of marrying the daughter of my divorced wife and some other person unknown?"

"I should be astonished beyond measure if he were to hesitate for one moment. At the same time, I don't see what excuse there can be for putting things to him with such—such brutal bluntness."

"I am afraid we must put things as they are. I have faithfully reported the woman's own words to you."

"Yes; and it seems from them that the question of parentage is at least open to doubt."

"Muriel is not my daughter," declared Leonard, curtly.

"So you say; but you must acknowledge, anyhow, that it is not in your power to prove the contrary. Don't you think that assertions of that sort are very unnecessary and very hard upon the girl?"

"They are undoubtedly hard upon the girl," Leonard answered; "I don't think them unnecessary. Whether I did wisely or rightly in concealing the facts of the case from her until the other day may be an arguable question; but now that I have been compelled to be candid with her, I think I ought to continue to be so. I can't say that I believe she has a drop of my blood in her veins, and, in justice to myself, as well as to her, my decision not to

constitute her my sole heiress should be accounted for."

"Oh, if you really think that that decision is just to her!"

"Well, she will come into a considerable fortune under my will. As regards the estates, they must either go to a very remote representative of the family or to somebody, not related to me, whom I may choose to name. Muriel is not related to me, nor is Archie. If my choice falls upon one of my own sex, rather than upon a woman, where is the injustice?"

"Only a married woman is not quite the same as a spinster, is she?"

"In other words, you would like me to substitute Harry for Archie."

This so accurately formulated the thought in Mrs. Morant's mind that her displeasure was not to be wondered at.

"You evidently set me down as a very designing person," she resentfully remarked. "All I can say is that I have never entertained any designs upon what belongs to you and that I don't presume to teach you your duty. But I am persuaded that I should not do mine by taking Archie out of his profession and handing him over to you. He is quite happy as he is, and in high spirits at the prospect of going out shortly to the Cape station. And, if you will excuse my saying so, I am sure it would not make him happy to feel that he had cut out his elder brother."

Leonard shrugged his shoulders and smiled faintly. It seemed useless to reiterate that the elder brother was not in the running, and he only rejoined:

"So Archie is to go to the Cape, is he?"

"Yes; I had a letter about it this morning, and we are all very glad. The climate is a good one; for the ship to which he is to be appointed will certainly not be sent to the West Coast, they say. Besides which, there is just the chance of active service, if this dispute with the Transvaal should end in war."

"I see," said Leonard, rising slowly. "Well, we

agreed, you know, that there should be no immediate question of the boy's leaving the Navy. I may live for many years yet, and perhaps I had better keep my intention as to what is to happen after my death to myself for the present. Only I think, for the sake of everybody interested, it should be clearly understood what will *not* happen. Now send your telegram or your letter, and I will try to prepare Muriel for consequences. I shall tell her, as I have told you, that my opposition is at an end; but I must also warn her that the young man may change his mind when he hears what he is now bound to hear."

"Harry is a gentleman!" cried Mrs. Morant indignantly and perhaps a little irrelevantly.

"I suppose she thinks I am not behaving like a gentleman," mused Leonard, as he left the room; "that is what women generally think when one puts them to inconvenience. Yet, so far as I am concerned, the situation remains unchanged. I take it that I should in any case have had the air of treating Muriel unfairly, and it is my own opinion of myself and my actions, not other people's opinion, that signifies."

To such a standard of conduct no exception can be taken; the difficulty is for any man to feel positive that his own view of himself and his actions is a correct one. Leonard was not as free from misgivings as he could have wished to be, and these were enhanced by a short talk with Archie, whom he met in the hall, on his way out.

"Hullo!—back already?" called out the boy, with that frank light of welcome in his eyes which is unhappily so seldom visible in the eyes of those of riper years. "They told me that you were going to be away for a week, perhaps, and I thought you might have let a fellow know."

"Of course I should have let you know if I had been going to be away as long as that," answered Leonard. "What have you been doing to make yourself so hot?"

"Killing rats in the barn," Archie replied, with a gleeful, reminiscent grin. "I wish I had known you were here; you'd have enjoyed it awfully! By good luck, Harry went off in such a hurry that he left Bob, his Irish

terrier, behind him, and we despatched a dozen of 'em before you could say knife. I say, this is rather a bad job about Harry, isn't it?"

"What is a bad job?" Leonard inquired.

"Oh, *you* know! Mother says I'm too young to understand; but I call that rather rot, don't you? Anyhow, Harry himself told me straight out that Miss Leonard had accepted him and then chucked him, without rhyme or reason, and he's in no end of a stew, as you may imagine, I wish," continued the boy, laying his hand on Leonard's arm, "you wouldn't mind telling me, between ourselves, what it all means."

"I agree with your mother," answered Leonard, smiling; "I don't think you are quite old enough to understand. However, I don't mind saying that there were difficulties which have now been overcome, and I believe, or, at any rate, your mother does—that the engagement will be announced before long."

"Good! I'm awfully glad of that. Because, although you don't care particularly about Harry, he isn't half a bad chap, I can tell you, and he'll soon be much the same thing as a son to you. What you want," added Archie sagely, "is somebody, not a woman, who'll take an interest in the property and succeed you one of these days."

"Possibly that is what I want; but suppose I had the bad taste to prefer somebody else—you, for instance—to your brother?"

"Oh, well, I can't marry your daughter, you see. Besides, we are sure to be always friends, you and I, whatever happens."

"I hope so; but couldn't you manage to take an interest in the property even though you can't become my son-in-law? Or would you really rather stick to the sea?"

Archie looked oddly, half-apologetically at his questioner. He was a very straightforward boy, and he did not pretend to miss the significance of the suggestion.

"It's awfully good of you, tremendously good of you, to think of such a thing," said he; "but don't you think that would be a bit rough upon your daughter and Harry?"

Leonard shook his head. "Not in my opinion," he answered.

"Oh, I think it would, and—and it would never do! I mean," Archie went on to explain, taking hold of his would-be benefactor's arm, which he squeezed in a friendly fashion, "it would make one feel so beastly uncomfortable, don't you know!"

He obtained no reply from Leonard, who, after sighing and frowning, presently remarked: "So you are off to South Africa, I hear."

"Yes," answered Archie, evidently glad to drop a delicate subject of discussion; "isn't it luck? I hope old Kruger don't climb down before we have a shy at him, that's all! I wonder whether those chaps really mean fighting or not?"

"I most sincerely trust, both for their own sake and for everybody else's, that they do not," Leonard said. "In any case, the Transvaal is not a maritime state."

"We shall land a lot of blue-jackets if there's war, though, you bet!" returned Archie, rubbing his hands. "And then won't the Boers just get snuff!"

"H'm! perhaps they are capable of giving as good as they get. Suppose you were to be knocked over in the process?"

"Oh, bless your soul! I shan't be hit," Archie confidently declared; "I hear those beggars can't shoot for nuts now—clean out of practice. No; you'll see me back in about eighteen months, with a swagger medal and mention in despatches. The only thing I'm afraid of is their caving in before it comes to blows."

Leonard went away rather sadly. The boy was not to be tempted, and it was all to his credit that he was not, by the offer of future wealth; he wanted, very naturally, to have his day, and that casual disparagement of the Navy as a profession in which he had indulged should not have been taken too seriously. For the rest, he might, in years to come, change his mind; but would he, even in years to come, relish a position the prospect of which made him "feel beastly uncomfortable"? The only plan, Leonard concluded, was to let the coming years decide. Never-

theless, he remained strangely, obstinately, resolute against dealing with Muriel as what she ostensibly was. He had been very sorry for her; he was now sincerely glad for her; he wished her to be happy, and meant to do his utmost to make her so. But she was not his child, and—she was her mother's child.

CHAPTER XXVI

A Question of Casuistry

IT is one of the results of modern domestic life in these islands that English girls nowadays very soon find out all that there is to be discovered, and Muriel Leonard, whose peculiar position placed her upon a footing of something like equality with married women, had little to learn respecting contemporary morals. She was therefore less horrified on hearing that she was the daughter of a *divorcée* than aggrieved that that information should have been so long withheld from her. Amongst her acquaintances were several divorced persons, and many others who might have been so; that the parentage of more than one great lady whom she knew was not what the red book declared it to be was a matter of notoriety, and, although her own code happened to be a rather strict one, she was inclined to look with disdainful toleration upon frailties so readily condoned in the circles to which she belonged. For her unknown mother she felt nothing but pity; to herself a little of the same sentiment was, it seemed to her, due; but against the man who had for all these years called himself her father she harboured a deep and not inexcusable resentment. She could not believe that consideration for her feelings had had anything to do with his long silence, which, if he had considered her at all, he would surely have broken as soon as Harry Morant appeared upon the scene, instead of waiting until circumstances left him no alternative but to speak out; she could not think that he had either treated her fairly or even attempted to do so; what seemed to be evident was that he simply had not troubled his head about her, one way or the other, beyond hoping that she would in due time marry and relieve him of an incubus.

In this latter respect she was quite inclined to oblige

him forthwith. She did not wish to remain under his roof any longer than she could help; he would, she knew, make handsome provision for her, and she likewise knew that candidates of suitable rank were obtainable without need for advertisement. There was, for example, Lord Forfar, who had just arrived, for the avowed purpose of shooting his host's partridges, and with the thinly veiled intention of offering to his host's daughter the privilege of paying his debts. Lord Forfar was a red-faced, red-bearded man, no longer young; his manners were bad, his temper was worse, his character was of the worst; also he was followed about wherever he went by a certain Mrs. Bingham Browne, a handsome, smartish, vulgarish woman, who, on her visits to her acquaintances, was always accompanied by a couple of snarling Chow dogs, and whose admission into the most exclusive circles had been won, as it was maintained, by sheer indomitable effrontery. Still, Lord Forfar was a Marquis, a Steward of the Jockey Club, a friend of numerous Royal personages; added to which, it was a point in his favour that Muriel detested him from the bottom of her heart. After the manner of her sex, she was bent, since she must needs be unhappy, upon rendering her unhappiness complete—anxious, moreover, to give Harry Morant every excuse for despising her. Certainly he would be unable any longer to love or respect a girl who had deliberately cast herself into the arms of Lord Forfar! So she poured out tea for that unattractive nobleman, endured without flinching his amorous glances (which were perhaps really amorous), and ignored the impertinence of Mrs. Bingham Browne, who had obviously come to Leonard's End in the hope of retaining a wavering allegiance.

"What on earth made you ask Mrs. Bing?" his Lordship growled out in an undertone, a fight between the Chows for possession of a muffin having momentarily drawn away the attention of their mistress.

"I did not ask her," Muriel answered; "I scarcely know her. She was so kind as to write and say that she was coming to us for a few days, and I presumed that she had been invited by you."

"Oh, I say, hang it, Miss Leonard, you know better than that! Why, the chief object of my life is to get away from the woman! At least, it would be, if my chief object wasn't to be near you."

He had given such practical effect to that object, with his elbows on his knees and his red face thrust forward, that Muriel was fain to retreat a little farther behind the tea-table.

"And look here," he went on, "if any of these old cats have been saying things to you about me and Mrs. Bing"—

"Oh, they have said things," interrupted Muriel, laughing; "I have even seen things for myself. But I assure you I don't in the least mind."

"I wouldn't," Lord Forfar emphatically declared, "touch her with a pair of tongs! I'm dead sick of the sight of her!"

His wooing was of that refined and insinuating character. Yet he was, if rumour spoke truly, the hero of innumerable conquests, won, it may be, in some degree by the crudity of the methods which he employed. Muriel was wondering whether death by drowning in the lake (it is so easy to tumble inadvertently into a lake!) would not, upon the whole, be preferable to becoming Marchioness of Forfar when the door opened and Leonard, whom she had not expected to see at home again so soon, walked in.

He advanced slowly toward the tea-table, halting on the way to speak to various groups of his guests, as usual, and greeted her at length—also as usual—with a nod and a slight smile. But there was something not altogether usual, she fancied, in the set of his features, a suggestion of kindness, of solicitude, possibly of compassion. There was, furthermore, a suggestion of antipathy in the quick glance which he directed at Lord Forfar, who said, not over civilly:

"Oh, it's you, is it? I thought you made a point of never being present at your own shoots."

"I am afraid," answered Leonard, in his quiet, courteous way, "that I shall not be able to go out with the

guns to-morrow; but I hope you will find that I have not neglected my duties and that you will have fair sport."

Then, turning to Muriel, he asked: "Could you spare me a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes? I want to have a word or two with you about domestic matters."

She rose at once, and as soon as he had conducted her into his private room, he said, smiling, "It need not be Forfar; things are not quite so bad as that."

"Lord Forfar or another," she returned; "I don't care who it is. Why shouldn't it be Lord Forfar?"

"Because the man is a brute, and because he would make your life a burden to you. At least, that is one reason; but I can give you a better. Sit down and listen while I tell you what I have been about these last two days."

Without more ado, and with the strictest economy of language and emotion, he proceeded to relate what at first seemed to be great and glorious news; but he was so anxious to shield her from a second and an even more bitter disappointment that he hastened to check the exclamations of joy which rose to her lips.

"Don't," he begged, "for Heaven's sake, don't assume that you are out of the wood yet! It is true that young Morant is no longer impossible; but I think you will agree with me that we cannot, under the circumstances, make advances to him. He will, of course, hear everything from his mother, and if, after hearing everything, he still sees fit to persist"—

"If he sees fit to persist!" interrupted Muriel wonderingly.

"Well, he may not. I presume he knows—at any rate, if he does not, he will be told—who and what your mother was; we cannot, unfortunately, tell him who or what your father was. I don't think that we should have any right to blame him if he were to withdraw."

The glad light faded out of Muriel's eyes; her cheeks grew pale and her face hard. "Lord Forfar or some other man may ask me to marry him any day," she remarked. "Ought I to tell them, or would you feel it your duty to tell them, what you say that Harry must hear?"

"No, I should not. It is a question of casuistry; but my feeling is that, since you were born in wedlock and since proof of your not being my daughter is unattainable, we are entitled to keep our own counsel. In the case of Harry Morant we cannot do so, for the simple reason that concealment is now out of the question. We can only account for your dismissal of him by a frank avowal of the truth or by a direct lie."

"So that if you had taken the step which you have just taken a little sooner, you would never have mentioned your suspicions even to me?"

"I should certainly not have mentioned them, and it is certain that I alone shall be to blame—I or my bad luck—if you are robbed of your chance of happiness in this world. There is no excuse for me; I fully admit that there is none; and what is still worse is that I can make no atonement. In short, we are at the young man's mercy."

"You mean, I suppose, that, happen what may, you will never acknowledge me as your daughter."

"I cannot!" answered Leonard, with a forlorn gesture. "To him I cannot. In the eyes of the world at large you are my daughter, and I shall say nothing to contradict the general impression; but between silence and affirmation there is a difference. It is beyond me to state what I know to be false—glad though I should be to make some amends for my selfishness and negligence."

"I am not asking you to state what you know to be false," the girl rejoined coldly. "I should have thought that you could not know, and my mother, from what you tell me, appears to have been of the same opinion; but most likely you are right. I doubt whether, if we were really father and child, we could feel about one another as we do."

A rather long pause supervened. It was literally out of his power to say what she wanted him to say, nor was she able to sympathise much with his evident distress. At last she resumed:

"I should like to see my mother some day. Would you object?"

"No," answered Leonard, after considering for a moment; "there is no reason that I know of why you should not see her now, if you wish it."

"I do wish it. She must, of course, have behaved very badly to you; but she has been punished, and—I can understand her having been a good deal tempted to behave badly. That, no doubt, is because I am her daughter."

Thus, with satisfaction on neither side and an increased sense of ill-usage on one, the interview terminated. It was not surprising that Muriel should deem herself badly treated, and perhaps not so very surprising that she should assume Harry's retirement, as she did, to be a foregone conclusion. Men (or such, at least, was her view) are apt to be more prejudiced than women in certain ways, and he might quite probably be choked off by a revelation which, had their positions been reversed, would not have shaken her fidelity for an instant. It might, after all, have to be Lord Forfar, and she really could not see why she should have been comforted by the assurance that "things were not so bad as that."

Lord Forfar in the course of the evening was as assiduous in his attentions as Mrs. Bingham Browne would allow him to be; but that lady appeared by some means or other to retain control over him and, for all his sulking and growling, he had to come in to heel when called. After being made to institute a prolonged investigation into the symptoms of one of the Chows, who was said to be ailing, and getting his fingers nipped by way of reward, he was led off to play a round game, at which he not only parted with his own money but had to make good the losses of his fair neighbour. Now, Lord Forfar was never a philosophical loser; so that when at length the time came for him to say good-night to Muriel, who had not formed one of the party at the card-table, he was very cross indeed.

"You never," he grumbled, "give a man a hand when he's in difficulties! I should have thought that, after you saw I was booked for that beastly game, you might at

least have joined in, instead of abandoning me to my fate!"

"Was it a beastly game?" asked Muriel indifferently. "I am sorry for that. I thought you liked cards and—Mrs. Bingham Browne."

"You know well enough that I didn't come here for that sort of thing. I don't suppose the sport to-morrow will be up to much either. I'll tell you what I *have* done; I've thrown away a week of the very best partridge shooting in England to accept your invitation. And now you won't allow me a chance of talking to you!" He added, in accents which were probably meant to be seductive, but which had rather the ring of command than of entreaty, "You'll come out with the luncheon to-morrow, won't you?"

"That is the usual programme, unless it rains," Muriel answered.

Lord Forfar was odious; but she was not going to let him know yet how offensive she found him. Not, she said to herself, for the next forty-eight hours (the outside space of time that could be needed to bring a man who was in any sort of hurry from Dorsetshire to the Midlands), and in all probability, not then. To feign affection for him would be a hard task, no doubt; but she felt pretty sure that he would not make a point of that. He was a little enamoured of her person and a good deal of her dowry; the promise of both would satisfy his demands, she imagined.

But a difficulty which she had not foreseen arose on the following day after luncheon, an elaborate meal, which was served at long tables in an orchard and at which all Muriel's lady guests were present. Lord Forfar, it appeared, had been shooting atrociously, owing to injury inflicted upon his trigger finger by the Chow, and soon after the conclusion of the feast he confidentially announced to his hostess that he was going to walk home with her.

"That filthy lap-dog has managed to spoil my sport in one way," he remarked; "but I'll forgive the brute if he gives me compensation in another. Thank Heaven, all

these women are bent upon seeing something of the afternoon's shooting; so we can just step quietly behind and give 'em the slip."

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Bingham Browne, who, for her own purposes, had seen fit that day to initiate a vigorous flirtation with another member of the party, was already out of sight, while the remaining sportsmen, accompanied by the female contingent, were moving away. It was evident that Lord Forfar, who had been drinking a good deal of champagne, meant to declare himself, and, that being so, there was little to choose between walking home with him and following the guns by his side. "I can stave him off for some time and give him an equivocal answer when we reach the house," Muriel thought. "Only I wish we hadn't quite such a long distance to tramp!"

The way was long, the sun was hot, and so, in every sense, was Lord Forfar; yet Muriel's glacial coldness and dexterity combined actually did enable her to prevent him for the best part of an hour from coming to close quarters. At the expiration of that time, however, she had not only snubbed and sobered him, but had reduced him to a condition of mental bewilderment in which he could discern nothing clearly, save her determination to close his mouth. On a sudden, therefore, he stood still and blurted out:

"Look here!—what's the use of going on like this? I'm crazily in love with you, and you know I am; so don't torture me any longer!"

"You have been crazily in love with a good many people, first and last, haven't you?" returned Muriel, imperterbably; although she perceived that the deferred crisis was imminent.

He laughed. "Well, I'm not going to deny what everybody knows, and of course one doesn't reach my age, or half my age either, as far as that goes, without having been in love. But I'll tell you what; you're the very first woman I have ever asked to marry me."

"Oh, naturally! How otherwise could you still be a

bachelor? I didn't understand that you were suggesting anything so serious as that, though."

"You didn't? I *am* serious, though—as serious as I can be! People have been telling you, I suppose, that I'm not a marrying man, and it's true that I've no great fancy for marriage in the abstract; but I adore you, Miss Leonard, and I want you to be my wife. There!"

This declaration was made with an air of conscious generosity so inimitable that Muriel had some difficulty in keeping her countenance; but she answered, without a smile:

"You flatter me immensely. I must be allowed time for consideration; I can't trust myself to accept or refuse such a splendid offer upon the spur of the moment."

"I don't see what there is to consider," returned Lord Forfar, frowning; "I've told you that I adore you."

"Yes; but, strange as it may appear, I don't adore you. I am afraid, if you press me, I must say No."

Although Lord Forfar had never before honoured any lady by asking her to marry him, he had avowed adoration for not a few, and his experience was that when they deprecated pressure they always meant to invite it. Accordingly, he planted himself in front of Muriel, caught her by both wrists and announced that he was going to have his answer then and there. She was rather frightened, for the man was strong, and she was not sure that he was quite sober, and—worst of all—her mind was not made up. All the greater, therefore, was her relief when he suddenly loosened his grasp and fell back a pace, muttering:

"Confound it! who is this infernal fellow?"

The infernal fellow to whom he alluded, and towards whom Muriel's back was turned, came cantering across the grass of the park, upon the confines of which the pair were standing, jumped off his horse, and advanced, his hat in his hand and anxious interrogation in his eyes. It seemed like an impossibility that Harry Morant could have arrived from Dorsetshire already; but Harry it unquestionably was, and Muriel, drawing a long breath, made haste to introduce him to Lord Forfar.

While the two men were still glaring at one another, and while Muriel, thankful for her release from immediate peril, was explaining that Lord Forfar had been obliged to stop shooting, in consequence of having hurt his finger, there came into view an open carriage (Miss Leonard's carriage) in which were seated a lady and a couple of barking dogs. The equipage had been ordered by Mrs. Bingham Browne, who was no pedestrian, to fetch her home; for it was her custom to give orders to other people's servants, and, although other people and their servants occasionally murmured, she was never disobeyed. Nor was she disobeyed when, on catching sight of the group, she called out in a high voice:

"Forfar, come here; I want you!"

"What the dickens do you want now?" snarled Lord Forfar under his breath.

But he went, all the same, and presently the couple whom he had left behind him had the satisfaction of seeing him driven away in the direction of the house, with the displaced Chows upon his knees and Mrs. Bingham Browne's vehemently nodding head in close proximity to his ear. He seemed to be catching it, and no doubt he was.

Then, in a tumult of mingled hope and fear, Muriel turned to her neighbour. "What has brought you back?" she asked.

"A telegram from my mother," he answered. "It reached me last night, and I should have been here the first thing this morning if I hadn't unfortunately been hung up at Birmingham by missing the connection of the trains. However, I got home in time to change, have something to eat and hear all. That is," he concluded, "all except the one thing which only you can tell me."

She looked down, sighed, raised her eyes again, and—after that there was no need for her to tell him anything. Yet there were, of course, many things to be said; so many that it became imperative upon them to move off to the adjacent woods, where he could hitch his horse up to a tree and where they could converse without risk of being intruded upon.

"Forgive you!" Harry exclaimed, in answer to a somewhat superfluous question on Muriel's part; "as if I had anything to forgive! I don't see how you could very well have acted otherwise; though it was ever so much harder upon you than it was upon me. The only thing for which you do perhaps owe me an apology is your having imagined that this news, or any news, might change me. What could have put such an extraordinary idea into your head?"

"Well—my father thought that it might."

"Oh, your father!" cried the young man; "I really haven't much patience with your father. He may mean well; but it seems to me that his conduct to you has been simply outrageous."

"Perhaps you wouldn't think so if you were in his place. He is persuaded that he has neither part nor lot in me and he doesn't like me personally; yet he is willing to give me a handsome marriage portion and to bequeath me a fortune at his death. One can't call that outrageous."

"I call it outrageous of him to assert that he has neither part nor lot in you. What authority, after all, has he for making such an assertion?"

"He has good excuses, I suppose, and probably he is not mistaken. But so long as you don't mind, I don't. Lord Forfar, I am sure, wouldn't."

Sundry uncomplimentary remarks were then made about Lord Forfar, who doubtless deserved them. That Leonard altogether deserved the resentment which he had incurred seems less certain; but impartial outsiders must admit that he could hardly expect two young people whom he had been within an ace of permanently severing to be very fond of him. It is true that he expected no such thing.

CHAPTER XXVII

Various Things come to an End

N OBODY of higher rank than the Marquis of Forfar being included in the house party at Leonard's End, it devolved upon that nobleman to escort his hostess to the dining-room, and he signified his appreciation of the privilege by bestowing a squeeze upon the finger-tips which she laid within his elbow. She was at a loss to account for his conciliatory and apologetic manner until they had seated themselves, when he took advantage of the hum of general conversation which immediately arose to whisper :

"I was awfully sorry to leave you in that unceremonious way this afternoon ; but it occurred to me that I might just as well get the thing over and have done with it."

"Yes?" said Muriel, still a little puzzled.

"I mean I thought I had better have it out with Mrs. Bing. So I had it out with her, and she told me that I might go and drown myself, for anything she cared. Not over and above civil, but one doesn't look for civility under such circumstances, does one?"

"I can imagine that one would not be very likely to get it."

"Not from her, anyhow ; she has a roughish tongue when she likes, I can tell you ! Well, she has been pretty expensive in one way and another," Lord Forfar went on, with pleasing candour ; "so I don't think she has much to complain about. By the way, who was the youth who overtook us this afternoon just before she turned up?"

"His name is Morant," Muriel answered.

"So you mentioned at the time ; his name doesn't make me any the wiser ? Anything else to be said about him ?"

"Yes; something rather interesting. But as it is more or less of a secret, you must promise, please, to treat this as a confidential communication."

"Oh, all right," answered Lord Forfar, laughing. "I know what it is; the young beggar has had the cheek to propose to you."

"He has; and I have had the—shall we call it the astounding folly?—to accept him."

Thus dexterously did Muriel contrive to avert the scene which a man so little accustomed to control himself as Lord Forfar might have made, under different conditions, on hearing of his defeat. He could not, of course, make a scene at the dinner-table; but he did swear, and he overturned his wine-glass. During subsequent intervals he expressed whispered incredulity, was assured that there was no room for anything of the kind, accused his neighbour of having brought him to Leonard's End upon a fool's errand, and finally declared that he should be off the very first thing in the morning.

"After all, I'm indebted to you," he muttered savagely just before the ladies left the room; "for if you have done nothing else for me, you've at least given me a good excuse to shunt Mrs. Bing."

"So glad to have rendered you that small service," answered Muriel sweetly.

Mrs. Bingham Browne, following the stream towards the doorway, surveyed her former admirer's lowering countenance and appeared to take in the situation at a glance. She laughed aloud, exhibiting a double row of white, even teeth.

"What's the matter, Forfar?" she asked. "Still got the hump because you were off shooting to-day? Cheer up! you may have better luck another time. It's always such a mistake to count your birds before you have brought them down, isn't it?"

That, so far as Muriel was concerned, was the end of Lord Forfar, who was as good as his word and left before breakfast the following morning. Somewhat less satisfactory and less conclusive was the brief parley which she held with her nominal father ere retiring for the night.

It was only then that Leonard, having been absent at a political meeting until the dinner hour, became available for purposes of private intercourse, and he listened to what she had to tell him with apparent pleasure, although he was not demonstrative. He said:

"I am very glad—very glad indeed. I most sincerely hope that you will be happy. You will not at first be rich; that is, you will not be able to keep the sort of establishment to which you have been accustomed; but I shall make the settlements that I should have made if—that I should have made in any case, and eventually you will be quite well off. I will see Harry Morant to-morrow and put all that in order."

"I think," Muriel could not help returning, "you will find that Harry is not quite as keen about settlements as about the recognition which you so emphatically refuse me."

"But surely the settlements imply recognition. What will be understood as recognition by everybody except ourselves, at any rate."

"I don't know; possibly, when people hear that I am not to inherit your estates, it will be understood as implying just exactly what it does imply. I am sure you won't suspect either Harry or me of greed; it is not the estates that we want. Only you must not be surprised if he appears to be rather ungrateful. Certainly, from your point of view, you are behaving with great generosity; but from ours, you see—well, from ours you are not."

Leonard sighed. "Do you mean that you dispute the truth of what I have told you?"

"You told me, I think, that a doubt might exist, although there was none in your own mind. But I am not complaining; I am merely trying to make you see that pecuniary generosity is not everything."

To Leonard this seemed unreasonable. "I very much regret," said he, "that it should have been necessary for me to take you into my confidence at all. It never would have been necessary if I had exercised a little forethought; that, of course, I admit. Still, as things have fallen out, you are none the worse off. I have always,

you must remember, been careful to make it clear to you that you would come into money, but not lands, on my death."

"Only you have always assigned another motive."

"I may have said that men are, in my opinion, more competent to manage large estates than women. It is a fact that that is my opinion."

He resumed, after pacing to and fro for a minute, "You ask for what it is out of my power to give. If I could say that I believed you to be my daughter, or even that I believed in the possibility of your being my daughter, I would say so. For some reasons, I should be almost glad to say so."

Only "almost"! Very visibly were his sentiments rendered by that qualifying adverb, and perhaps Muriel forgot that if he had been persistently chilling with her, she had manifested no warm affection for him.

"Well," she answered, getting up, "we won't quarrel about it. We have never been given to quarrelling, have we?"

"And I hope we never shall be. My wish is to be fair; I see your point, and I may yet feel it to be my duty to make your future husband my heir. Candidly, I do not think that I shall; but I may. However, I can at present give nothing in the nature even of a conditional promise."

He had to express himself in similar terms on the morrow, when he drove over to Woodside to seek out Harry and was received in preliminary audience by Harry's mother. Mrs. Morant, cordial and jubilant at first, grew a little reproachful, as well as a little impatient, after he had been talking to her for a time.

"All would be so simple if you didn't insist upon creating complications!" she exclaimed. "Is it really worth while at our age to complicate matters? The past is over and done with, and the present surely ought to belong to the young people, not to us!"

"In the past," returned Leonard sadly, "which is over and done with, as you say, and which was not particularly happy for either of us, you were always more unselfish than I; you are so still, I daresay. But, constituted as I

am, I can't, even for the sake of making the present smooth, put the future in pledge. The utmost I can say is that I will leave the question of inheritance provisionally open, and I must in honesty add—at all events to you—that I still wish and expect Archie to succeed me at Leonard's End."

"We must all hope," observed Mrs. Morant, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "that it may be many years before anybody succeeds you. I can't, of course, wish Archie to be placed in an invidious position, glad though I am that he has found such a staunch friend in you, and I can't help wishing that you saw your way to the more natural arrangement; but as for selfishness, I don't accuse you, and never have accused you, of that. You think a great deal more of others than you do of yourself; only—it seems to me that you so seldom realise what is best for others!"

"Oh, I realise," Leonard answered, "that things would be more comfortable for everybody if I were to affect belief in what I know is not the truth; I realise that I am going to have a rather disagreeable quarter of an hour with Harry, when I might without difficulty have a pleasant one. All the same, I shall tell him what I have told you. There will be good settlements on his marriage day and there will be a large sum of money on the day when my will is read; but there will be neither overt acknowledgment nor overt denial on my part of Muriel's legitimacy."

His quarter of an hour with Harry did not, after all, prove so very disagreeable; for the young man was quite respectful, quite good-humoured, quite appreciative of his future father-in-law's pecuniary liberality. With regard to Muriel's legitimacy, however, something had of necessity to be said, and upon this point Harry, though courteous, was firm and explicit.

"You may have grounds for your suspicions, Lord Leonard," he remarked; "I don't pretend to be a judge of whether you have or not. All I know is that you have at least suspected one man wrongfully, and I take it that I, like the rest of the world, am entitled to call your

daughter your daughter until it has been proved that she is not."

"Unquestionably you are," Leonard agreed, "and it is only through an unfortunate accident that I am obliged to speak to you about what you very naturally set down as mere suspicions. There will be no occasion, I hope, for us to allude to the subject again."

Somehow, Leonard could not feel that he had come well out of the above amicable encounters. Neither by Mrs. Morant nor by her son had he been denounced as obstinate, unfair and wrong-headed; but that they both considered him to be all three was patent, and really they were not very much to blame for so considering him. It would, as Mrs. Morant had urged, have been so simple to steer clear of complications! And, when all was said, Archie did not want the inheritance which would in all probability be thrust upon him some day.

What Archie wanted more than anything else at that particular moment was to perfect himself in the use of fire-arms. Leonard came across him presently in the garden, and he mentioned his requirement with the direct candour which belonged to his age and his temperament.

"I say, you haven't such a thing as a rifle to lend me for a bit of practice, have you? It's all right about the Boers, you know. They're going to fight us, and I should like to make sure of being able to hit a house at five hundred yards before we wade in."

"I doubt whether you could aim at this house with safety to its inhabitants or to the casual bystanders," answered Leonard; "I doubt still more whether the authorities would allow you to go into action with a rifle over your shoulder, and I am glad to say that I doubt most of all whether your services will ever be required against the Boers. No; I'm not going to lend you a rifle; but I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll drive you to the gunsmith's and buy a revolver. Then we shall be able to test your capacities without risk of being arrested for culpable homicide."

Archie willingly accepted this compromise, and in the company of the sole fellow-creature who never failed to

set him at his ease Leonard managed to dismiss problems which, for the rest, demanded no immediate solution. The allies drove into the neighbouring town together, purchased their weapon, lunched at a pastry-cook's and, returning to a safe and secluded clearing in the woods, devoted the remainder of the day to riddling a pocket-handkerchief with bullets. During the intervals of shooting they conversed, as was their wont, upon a wide range of topics; but only a few words were said respecting Harry and Muriel. The betrothal, Leonard announced, was an accomplished fact, and when Archie had observed that he was jolly glad of that, the subject was dropped by mutual tacit consent. They understood one another, those two.

The autumn of the year 1899, which, as may be remembered, was a fine and warm one, brought full measure of satisfaction and enjoyment to the personages concerned in this narrative. The engaged lovers were, of course, supremely happy; Mrs. Morant was placidly contented; visitors were, for once in a way, conspicuous by their absence from the great house, which had never enjoyed a very high reputation for its partridge shooting, and Leonard, accompanied only by Archie, set forth daily to walk up the birds across roots and stubble. It is recorded on one of the concluding pages of his lordship's diary that those were the happiest times of his whole life. Perhaps he forgot, as we are all apt to forget, on looking back, how they were saddened for him by the shadow of an impending and permanent loss. Permanent his loss was, in one sense, bound to be; since boyhood is evanescent, and whoever might return to him at the end of two or three years, it could not assuredly be the same Archie who so cheerfully anticipated exile. Every day these quiet little tragedies are being enacted all over the crowded islands which give their name to our vast empire. We cannot keep our fledglings in the nest; we cannot even keep them near it; with heavy hearts and as stiff an upper lip as we can compass, we send them forth in an unending flight to the four quarters of the globe, knowing full well that we shall see them no more—that school days, holi-

days, irresponsible days are over and done with for ever. There is absolutely no help for it, and if England is to remain the great nation that we all wish her to be, we must submit without murmuring to that form of taxation, as to others. Only our hair turns grey and our cheeks become furrowed and we grow old before our time in the process.

Leonard, who had no illusions and prided himself upon having none, foresaw the solitude which awaited him, foresaw the excitements, the amusements, the distractions which awaited his juvenile crony, foresaw also the likelihood of his being clean forgotten. Was it wonderful that he was so strongly tempted to render actual oblivion at least impossible? But he refrained. Most things, or the simulacra of them, can be purchased; only it is not worth while to buy what depends for its real value upon being a free gift. He shrank from saying to the boy, "I am going to make a rich man of you one of these days; the least you can do in return is to let me hear from you sometimes." Moreover, it was not yet a matter of certainty that he would do what he still desired and meant to do. So he put temptation away from him.

For the rest, Archie needed no bribes. Leonard had won his heart, which was a warm and faithful little organ; if he was eager to be off to the wars, that was only because he had the pluck and love of adventure which nobody could wish him to be without; if he took short and optimistic views of life, what other views could be expected of him at his age? As the time for him to depart drew near, he became rather sober and pensive; but he neither regretted nor affected to regret a prospect which drew frequent tears from his mother's eyes and perceptibly lengthened Leonard's long, melancholy visage.

"It's beastly having to say good-bye," he confessed to the latter, on the occasion of their last talk together; "but it will be all the jollier to come home again, you know. And it is luck to get the chance of active service on one's first ship, isn't it?"

Leonard nodded. "Oh, yes; it's luck—better luck than being a landed proprietor, and sitting on committees

in the House of Lords, and writing stuff which nobody seems particularly eager to read. Only I wish I were going with you, Archie; I wish it had pleased God to let me stick to my own trade!"

The boy laughed a little and patted him on the arm. "I know," he answered comprehensively.

"Yes," Leonard went on, "you know; and you are the only human being who does, or ever has. Well—you'll write to me, won't you?"

"Rather!" Archie promised. "And I shall be back in England before you know where you are. Then won't we just have ripping times together!"

Leonard looked down at his bright face with a great envy and affection and inarticulate yearning. There was so much that he would fain have said; there is always so much that we, who have grown old and have learnt to our cost and sorrow what an ugly business life is, would fain say to our juniors at such times! But we are helpless, as our fathers were before us; every dog must have his day, and every man must fight his own battles for himself. All that Leonard, whose voice was a trifle hoarse, could manage to get out at last was:

"Be a gentleman, my dear boy. I know you will be that, though, and I am not afraid for you. We have been good friends and we have had good days, haven't we? Now the good days have come to an end; but there shall never, if I can help it, be an end to our friendship. And—and you must come back to me, Archie, for you are all I have in the world."

By way of response, Archie suddenly smote his companion in the ribs. "I say, confound it!" he remonstrated, with simulated indignation, "you'll make me blub in a minute! Why—I believe you're almost blubbing yourself!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mother and Daughter

THE weakness of which Leonard, a man little given to displaying emotion, had been accused by his young friend was indulged in without disguise or restraint by Mrs. Morant when the time came for her to part with her boy. She wept like a fountain, and perhaps Archie's own blue eyes were not quite free from moisture at the last moment; for his mother had always been the best of mothers to him, as, to do her justice, she had been to all her children, and one of the conditions of life in the Navy is to have no home any more. Well, the train took him away, saluted by the waving of damp handkerchiefs on the part of his assembled family, and Mrs. Morant, sobbing in the corner of the brougham which a considerate friend of hers had provided to drive her home, gasped out:

"Oh, I wish I hadn't let him go!—I wish I hadn't! I might have taken your offer; though it sounded so eccentric and—and unfair to others, and all! Still, I believe I should have accepted it if you had only insisted a little more!"

Leonard, as need scarcely be said, had intended her to have the carriage to herself; but she had begged him to accompany her—"because you understand, and because I know you won't mind my crying"—so there he was, and he understood very well. So well that he answered quietly:

"It wouldn't have done for me to insist, after what both you and Archie said. He might have regretted it afterwards if I had, and you unquestionably would. I fully admit that the project was a somewhat fantastic one, if I

can't admit the unfairness which is already obvious to you and would have become more and more obvious. Probably all is for the best; anyhow, what is to be will be, whether we break our hearts over it or not. But you are not going to break your heart; you will be much better to-morrow and as cheerful as ever in a week."

"I don't think it is very kind of you to say that," Mrs. Morant remonstrated, in a choking voice.

Kind or otherwise, it was true. She had Harry and her daughters to console her; she had an approaching marriage of a highly satisfactory nature in the family to look forward to; she had to make the plans for her own future which that marriage necessitated; she was, in short, a busy woman, while she had many reasons for being a happy one. Leonard, who was without consolations, may be pardoned if in his sympathy there was a slight flavour of bitterness. He was without consolations and he sought none, submitting to fate with the silent stoicism which was the outcome, possibly in some measure the cause, of his grey, solitary life. Transient gleams of sunshine had at rare intervals illuminated that greyness; of these the last and best had now vanished, and he could not yet begin to count upon its ultimate return. Wandering through the mellowing woods about which faint echoes of Archie's fresh young voice and joyous laughter still seemed to hover, he was probably as lonely and forlorn a man as could have been found in all England. It is bad to leave those whom we love, but it is very much worse to be left behind by them, and Leonard, ever with a dull aching pain about the region of the heart, derived a sort of miserable pleasure from revisiting the haunts which he would perhaps have done more wisely to avoid. The grassy shooting-drive where the boy had once challenged him to race a hundred yards and had delightedly outstripped him, notwithstanding his superior length of limb; the beech-tree, scored with marks of revolver bullets, upon which Archie had bestowed the name of "old Kruger"; the fence at the end of the park, which the cob had refused half-a-dozen times and over which he had at last hurled himself, with

a grunt, very nearly disposing of his rider in the process, how mute, how eloquent, how different, yet how inexorably, mournfully the same they all were! To stand gazing at such spots was like looking down upon so many corpses. There is in Leonard's journal a passage, very characteristic of the writer, which throws some light upon the depths of his rather morbid melancholy at this juncture.

"I suppose it is true," he says, "that crabbed age and youth cannot dwell together. Not as a permanent arrangement, anyhow. My dear boy and I were intimate and happy because we never had occasion to think much about the gulf that yawns between us, nor needed to bridge it over; but when he returns to me as a young man the case will be altered. There will be inevitable reticences on the one side, suppressed anxieties and misgivings on the other; perhaps I shall still read his thoughts and feelings, having once been young myself; but he, not having been old, will only be able to guess at mine, and never again will he be as completely at his ease with me as of yore. One must recognise the unchangeable laws of nature and see things as they are. *Fuimus!*—the incident is closed."

His strong desire for truth and his abhorrence of illusions were apt to mislead him at times. They certainly appear to have done so with regard to Muriel, who was genuinely sorry for him, and who—being herself so happy—made tentative advances which were quite kindly and courteously repelled. If Leonard was sure of anything, he was sure that the girl had no sort of love for him; he does not seem to have perceived, save dimly and fitfully, that he had only himself to thank for that; he evidently disliked and set down as insincere tardy efforts at affection to which he could not adequately or honestly respond. And Muriel did not persist. For conscience' sake and because something unwontedly pathetic about his aspect in those days touched her, she had tried to draw a little nearer to him; but since he preferred to be let alone, she let him alone. Her time and attention, moreover, were just then amply engaged.

Soon a move was made to Grosvenor Place, it having been arranged that Muriel's wedding should take place in London, and preparations—sumptuary and other—for the ceremony being needful. It was on the day following this change of quarters that the girl startled Leonard a little by suddenly reminding him of a somewhat reluctant promise which she had extorted from him.

"You said," she began, "that you would not object to my seeing my mother. Will you give me her address?"

"Yes, if you make a point of it," he answered slowly; "but I should have thought that, upon the whole, it would be better for you not to meet. You cannot have much to say to one another, and you cannot, I am afraid, see anything of one another in the future."

"She is my mother," Muriel observed.

"Yes; and she chose to abandon you almost before you were out of your cradle. She is now professedly repentant, whatever her repentance may be worth; but it seems to me that that abandonment must—for social purposes, at any rate—be treated as final."

"Well, she is my mother and I want to see her, even if it is only to be for once," Muriel persisted. "I think we may find a good deal to say to one another, notwithstanding all that has come and gone."

They had plenty to say to one another when Muriel visited the house in Belgrave Road that afternoon and was tearfully embraced by the scented, powdered, elderly lady, whose appearance might have shocked her, had she not been steeled against possible shocks by predetermined sympathy. Her mother, she conceived, had undoubtedly done things which she ought not to have done; but then her putative father had, on his side, left undone things which he ought to have done; it was not difficult to divine that a case might be made out for the so-called Mrs. Vane, nor was Mrs. Vane slow to defend herself.

"My dearest child," said she—and the Creator of women only knows whether her emotion was simulated

or not, but very likely it was not—"I have forfeited all claim upon you, and, sweet as it is of you to come to me, I should never have dreamt of asking you to do so. But you must not think that I have not always longed for you and always, since I began to pray at all, prayed for you. I sinned against your father in a way which nothing could, or ever can, condone; I have been punished as I have deserved to be punished, and I am far from complaining. Only you can understand, perhaps, that when I was young and had, alas! no religious principles, it was hard for me to resist temptation. You cannot have lived with your father all these years and failed to realise that it is not easy to live with him."

"He has made life with him easy for me in some ways," Muriel had the honesty to admit; "but he has never treated me like a daughter."

"That I can well believe! You are my daughter, which is quite enough to make him hate and repudiate the idea of your being his own. He scarcely took the trouble to contradict me when I told him so at Brighton, and he only smiled when I tried to make him see the cruelty of visiting my offences upon your innocent head. He is so cold and so vindictive!"

He was neither; but it was his misfortune that he impressed the majority of his fellow-mortals as being certainly the former, if not the latter, while Muriel, naturally enough, deemed him to be both.

"He has never treated me like a daughter," she repeated, "and of course, until lately, my being always held at a distance has seemed to me rather inexplicable. Even now that all is explained, and when I must acknowledge that he has treated me, according to his lights, with generosity, I can't help wondering sometimes whether he is not doing both you and me an injustice."

Mrs. Vane jumped at that leading suggestion. She was a lonely woman, desperately bored at times with her dull, decorous life, her few acquaintances, her total lack of friends; she was, after all, human, and therefore susceptible of natural affections; finally, she was sharp

enough to form a shrewd guess at the motive—conscious or unconscious—of her daughter's visit.

"He has been unjust from first to last!" she exclaimed. "Mind you, I don't say that he was not perfectly justified in divorcing me or that I have any right to blame him for ridding himself of a bad woman; but I do blame him for asserting what cannot be proved, and I do blame him a little also for having helped to make me what I confess, to my shame, that I was. Shall I tell you the whole story of our marriage and its lamentable results? Perhaps, if I did, you would feel some pity for your poor old wretch of a mother, though I can't ask or expect you to pardon her."

She told the story—not in the least truthfully, yet with a strict adherence to facts which doubtless satisfied her conscience and enabled her to make use of requisite glosses and suppressions. There are always at least two ways of telling every imaginable story, and it is improbable that any human being since the world began has ever narrated his or her own in such a manner as to redound more than can be helped to his or her disadvantage. Leonard's betrothal to Juliet Vyse, his despair on being ruthlessly jilted by her, his impetuous transfer of allegiance to the humble governess who was at first sorry for him, then dazzled by him and his high position; his speedy disenchantment and unconcealed indifference—all that sounded sufficiently plausible, and served to explain, if not to excuse, the flighty conduct of his victim. "For I was fond of admiration in those days, my dear," Mrs. Vane demurely avowed, "and I knew how to secure it. Now that I have done with personal vanity, and all the other vanities of this world, I may plainly say that very few men were able to resist me. Your father was one of them; Mr. Morant seemed for a time to be another. You see what form temptation took, and I must remind you again that I was unhappily without religious convictions of any kind to keep me straight."

"But," began Muriel hesitatingly and apprehensively, "you are quite sure"—

"Oh, absolutely sure!" the other returned, without

waiting for the conclusion of the query. "So ought your father to have been. But he was blinded, I suppose, by his detestation of me and his unwillingness to admit that you could belong to us both."

The further query which Muriel would fain have put, yet could not bring herself to formulate, received almost immediate response.

"Nevertheless, you do belong to us both," Mrs. Vane resumed. "He may think what he pleases, and, like many another man, he may have had cause for misgivings; but by every recognised law you are his child, and he has no right to affirm that you are not."

Whatever ambiguity may have lurked in the above statement Muriel chose to ignore. There was, to be sure, a good deal connected with her mother's history which could by no possibility be ignored; but she wanted, so far as it might lie in her power, to take her mother's part, and perhaps she likewise wanted to take her own. A stigma, more or less dishonouring to her and her future husband, had been placed upon her; no wonder she was anxious for its removal. Her mother's anxiety that it should be removed was perhaps less intelligible, since the latter realised, and indeed stated in so many words, that she could not hope to regain a position irrevocably forfeited; but it was not less fervent.

"He must acknowledge you, and he shall!" the latter cried, at the end of a long talk in which Muriel specified her own grievance and Harry's. "He shall not publicly insult you by cutting you out of his estates, even if I have to go to him myself and dare him to do such a thing!"

The method suggested did not sound like a particularly promising one for dealing with a man of Lord Leonard's temperament, nor could Muriel advise its adoption; but she determined to make a personal appeal, and this decision she carried into effect immediately on her return to Grosvenor Place, where, as it chanced, she encountered Leonard at the door.

"I have seen my mother," she announced, after they had entered the house together; whereupon he nodded interrogatively.

"Yes, I have seen her, and I admit, as she does, that it will not be practicable for us to see one another often again. But I also think, as she does, that she has undisputed offences enough to suffer for, without being charged with imaginary ones. When she claims that I am your child, as well as hers"—

"Does she make that claim?" interrupted Leonard.

"Would not the law and public opinion support her, if she did?"

"The law undoubtedly would; I am not so sure about public opinion, which might be influenced by revelations on my part. But I thought you understood that I have not the slightest intention of making revelations and that I shall never, by word or act, disavow you."

"Is not appointing an heir to your estates who is neither your supposed daughter nor your supposed son-in-law tantamount to a disavowal?" Muriel asked, flushing a little. For she could not but feel how liable such a question was to be misinterpreted.

Leonard, however, did not misinterpret it. He answered quietly and without displeasure, "We have not hitherto taken that view, have we? You take it now, not because you are covetous, but because you would so gladly, for Harry's sake, be what you are not. And you try to fortify your case by enlisting the partisanship of your mother, who was once my wife. But don't you see that I am powerless?—that no power on earth can make you what you are not, and what your mother knows as well as I do that you are not?"

"You say that I am not what my mother says that I am," returned Muriel obstinately. "Are not all accused persons considered innocent until they have been proved guilty?"

"Legally and in this country, that is so; abstract justice is another thing. We shall not get any nearer to mutual comprehension by obscuring the issue. But indeed, although you do not understand me, I believe I understand you, and—may I say that I also heartily sympathise with you? There are things which I can never say, and perhaps—I don't know—there are things which

I can never do. But I would do them if I could; I will do them if I can. More than that it is impossible for me to promise."

He was visibly moved, and Muriel, albeit more than half persuaded that he was under a fixed delusion, recognised his reluctance to be cruel. Herself somewhat moved by his divination of incentives which had overcome her natural pride, she turned away, ending the colloquy with a sigh. "I could have been fond of him," she mused; "but he could never have become fond of me. That, whatever he may imagine, is his real reason for repudiating me. After all, it is true, I suppose, that, feeling as he does, he is powerless."

The diary furnishes confirmatory testimony. "It must not," writes the diarist, "be demanded of me now that I should make concessions which I have explicitly declared from the first that I did not mean to make. Surely it is enough, or should be, that Muriel will inherit a great deal more money than I could have left her if I had had a son! Yet there is something in what she—and, I presume, Harry also—urges. Since I am seeking outside my own family for an heir, it will certainly seem a little odd, perhaps even a little sinister and significant, to select my son-in-law's younger brother, instead of himself. At moments I am almost inclined to give in; but then at once I say to myself 'No; hang it, I *can't*!' And whether this is because Archie is like my son, while Muriel is so very unlike my daughter, or whether it is the result of an invincible, lifelong prejudice I have no idea. Perhaps I resemble President Kruger, with whom I am secretly, scandalously in sympathy. It was not reasonable of him to object to being cooked and eaten when we were willing to do this in the kindest and most considerate way; but he lays his foolish old ears back, as I lay back mine, and it may be that eventual discomfiture is in store for us both. Nevertheless—*non possumus!*"

CHAPTER XXIX

In Dark November

IT would have been very unlike Leonard to find himself in agreement with his party and the majority of his fellow-countrymen respecting the inevitable war which broke out in South Africa at this time. By his way of thinking, war was not inevitable and ought to have been avoided; rightly or wrongly, he was of opinion that it had been undertaken, not to say provoked, with an ignoble aim and on behalf of ignoble persons; it was contrary to all our traditions, he averred, to crush the life out of nationalities which asked for nothing but their independence, and he could not see what the alleged misgovernment and corruption of such nationalities had to do with the question. He was, in short, as a member of the Ministry, to whom he imparted his views, impatiently told him, "no statesman," and the speech which he delivered in the House of Lords on the occasion of the brief autumn session would have seriously compromised his reputation and prospects, had he possessed either in a political sense. But it had long been recognised that Lord Leonard, though honest, was unpractical and impracticable. What use, indeed, can be made of a man who, as a general rule, votes with his own side and, as an almost invariable rule, speaks against it?

In private life his disqualifications, or at any rate his perversities, were scarcely less conspicuous to those about him, some of whom, nevertheless, could not refuse him their regard and esteem. Mrs. Morant, for one, felt for him, though he vexed and distressed her. Herself a good deal of an opportunist, she respected people

who deliberately made themselves and others uncomfortable for the sake of a principle, and she had always acknowledged that the man who had been in love with her once upon a time was amongst the most upright and honourable of his species.

"But is it not rather a pity," she asked him, one afternoon, when she was giving him a cup of tea in the small private hotel in Mayfair where she had taken up her temporary residence, "to estrange Muriel, who, I know, would gladly be friends with you and who, after all, is your child in everybody's eyes, except your own?"

"I don't wish to estrange her," he answered; "I have never wished to do so."

"Well, you behave as if you did. You have been very generous to her with regard to money; of course she realises that, as we all must. But don't you think you might show a little more generosity in another direction?"

Leonard shook his head. "You are asking me to tell a lie," he observed. "I can't do that."

"I ask nothing of the sort," Mrs. Morant declared. "In the old days which you remember I knew many things which made me unhappy and which would have brought great unhappiness upon my children if I had chosen to talk about them; I don't think that I was guilty of falsehood because I preferred to keep my eyes and mouth closed. You are convinced that Muriel is not your daughter, and perhaps she is not; but surely you might spare her that announcement!"

"I spared her as long as I could," Leonard answered. "No doubt I was to blame in not ascertaining, as I might have done, that it was possible to spare her altogether; but that is a bygone blunder. I hardly know what you mean by saying that I announce anything now; I make no announcement."

"You announce that you will virtually make one by your will."

"What you mean is that you think I ought to appoint Harry instead of Archie. I may do so yet; I can't tell, and I know I can't make myself intelligible to you. But

will you at least believe that I am anxious to do my duty to everybody?"

Mrs. Morant had no difficulty in believing that, nor did she find him wholly unintelligible. At the same time, she wished, as his political friends did, that he were a little less hopelessly angular. Really, she thought, the general scheme of things requires that one should fit one's actions in some degree to unavoidable circumstances and make the best that can be made of an imperfect world. He came and sat with her a good deal in those days, and his conversation related for the most part to Archie, about whom she was willing enough to talk. Further efforts to bring about a better feeling between him and Muriel would, she perceived, be injudicious; so she bided her time.

Those were dark days, both in an atmospheric and in a patriotic sense. The news of the battle of Talana Hill—"Majuba reversed," as the press exultantly called it—was speedily followed by disquieting reports; then came Elands-laagte, a victory indeed, but by no means a conclusive one; then the retreat of our troops from Dundee, the disaster of Nicholson's Nek, the investment of Ladysmith and the somewhat dismayed discovery on the part of the British public that this war was going to be a very serious business indeed. The British public, to be sure, remained confident of ultimate success, and so did Leonard, little though he liked the adventure.

"Of course we shall beat the Boers," he said; "we simply can't afford not to beat them, now that we are in for it. But we shall have to pay a huge price in money and blood, we shall gain no national glory, we shall lose the respect of every civilised nation, and we shall find ourselves obliged to resort to compulsory service. A campaign of that sort is scarcely satisfactory to those who have not the good fortune to be combatants."

He was cheered, as well as slightly perturbed, early in November by a letter from somebody who, if not already a combatant, hoped soon to become one. Archie wrote in great glee to say that a Naval Brigade was being formed to proceed to the front, that he was to be in-

cluded in it and that, according to the general prediction, they would have their work cut out for them.

"They can't do without us, you see; I told you they couldn't. Isn't it rare luck my being one of the snotties who are to be allowed a look in! I didn't expect it, because of course I only joined such a short time ago; but I'm going to make the most of my chance, I can tell you! That revolver you gave me is an awfully good weapon, and I make stunning practice with it now; so Mr. Boer had better mind his eye. Our job is to be the relief of Kimberley, under Lord Methuen. It looks a jolly long way on the map; but there is a railway as far as a place called De Aar. After that I don't know; we shall have to foot it, I expect. I daresay the newspapers have told you more about the war than I can, because we don't hear much, and what we do hear generally turns out afterwards to be a lot of lies; but I'll write you a ripping long account of my first battle. My love to everybody. I wish I could be at Harry's wedding, but in some ways it will be better fun out here, don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," answered Leonard aloud, with a dreary little laugh, as he restored this jubilant missive to its envelope. "Why am I not out there? Why shouldn't I go out there?—and get myself shot, by the mercy of Heaven! After a few more reverses, which we are as likely as not to encounter, the country will be shrieking for volunteers, and although volunteers will probably be quite useless, they are sure to respond in thousands. I wonder whether amongst all the thousands who are going to be butchered there is a single unit who will be less missed than I should be!"

It has to be acknowledged that poor Leonard's removal would have caused no great blank in anybody's life, save perhaps in Archie's. One afternoon, a few days before that appointed for the wedding ceremony, he was sitting in the room which served him as a study, somewhat more than usually oppressed by a sense of hopeless solitude, when the door was thrown open and, to his amazement, in sailed his former wife.

"I refused to give my name," Mrs. Vane said; "I knew you wouldn't receive me if I did, and I had it upon my conscience to be received by you for this once. I hope it is not necessary for me to assure you that I have not come here with any intrusive or selfish purpose."

Leonard politely placed a chair for her, while he himself remained standing. "Your purpose," he replied, "stares me in the face. I quarrel neither with it nor with you; there is something to be said on behalf of both, no doubt. Only it does seem curious that you, of all people in the world, should press me for a concession which I cannot make. Mrs. Morant I understand and Muriel I understand; they are naturally eager to give credence to a certain possibility, and they see no conclusive reason for its being an impossibility. But—we are alone, you and I. With what sort of a countenance can you ask me to state that Muriel is our child?"

It was with an unmoved, unashamed and thickly powdered countenance that Mrs. Vane returned, "I told you at Brighton that my daughter might be your daughter—that I could not say she was not."

"I remember your doing so, and I remember thinking it a little odd of you to do so. Is not this rather a waste of time and words? Of course we know what we know, you and I. Mrs. Morant stands upon firmer ground when she pleads the expediency of closed eyes and closed lips. Well, am I not closing mine?"

"Not if you bequeath your estates to an outsider. The meaning of that will be evident to all the world."

"I do not think so; but I must be excused if I decline to argue the point. I believe you are disinterested, and I believe Muriel is disinterested; nevertheless, you go far beyond what you are entitled to demand. All I can say is that I shall act in accordance with what I take to be my duty."

Mrs. Vane jumped up in an abrupt rage. "Oh, what sickening rubbish!" she cried. "How you bring back old days to me with your solemn talk about duty and your determination to do just exactly what pleases you!

Why are you going to spoil this poor child's life by bringing a sort of reflected disgrace upon her husband of which she will always be conscious and for which she will always more or less have to apologise? Because she is not your child? Not a bit of it! Because you have taken a sentimental fancy to the youngest boy of your old flame, because you never quite got over your fondness for his rascal of a father, whom he is like in the face, they say, and because you hate Muriel for being my daughter. You profess to be fond of the truth—well, there it is for you!”

Then she suddenly recollected herself and resumed, in more subdued accents: “I ought not to speak like that; no Christian ought to speak like that. I beg your pardon, Lord Leonard. We are all of us miserable sinners, and our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. Yet even the words of a sinful and angry woman may be blessed to you, provided that you accept them in a humble and contrite spirit. If you are bent upon doing an injustice, recognise it at least for what it is.”

What he did recognise, and in some degree admired, was her fiercely genuine maternal instinct. From the nature of the case she could be actuated by no other motive, he thought, and its somewhat belated awakening drew him, for the very first time in his life, into something like sympathy with her. There was, moreover, enough of truth in what she called the truth to increase his disquietude. For he was, as a matter of fact, very strongly bent upon making Archie his heir. He said:

“You judge me, perhaps, rather more harshly than I deserve; but, on the other hand, I can't pretend to have judged you leniently. Let us try to part, if we can, with some sort of approach to mutual respect. You do well to stand up for your child, and I see the force of what you urge; yet you might, with an effort, see that there is a case also for me. Admitting that I am predisposed in favour of one who is more dear to me than your child, that does not, to my mind, prove me to be unjust. I pledge myself to nothing; I can only promise that I

shall never be guilty of intentional injustice to anybody and that I will carefully consider the whole situation before I finally deal with it."

"Oh, it is easy to understand what that means and easy to predict how you will finally deal with the situation," returned Mrs. Vane, reverting to her former manner. "As for mutual respect, it stands to reason that you can have none for me, and I haven't, candidly speaking, a great deal for you. There is nothing to be gained by talking to you, though, and you will be glad to hear that I am now going away."

He certainly was not sorry for that; although he was really sorry for her and still more so for Muriel, to whom on the eve of her wedding he gave a magnificent necklace and a kiss. The girl thanked him a little wistfully, saying, with a hint of tears in her voice:

"You have been very good to me, and I don't think I have been very good to you. But I want you to know that I would have been if you had allowed me, and that I will be still if you ever want me and will ever allow me."

The nuptial rites were solemnised, with all befitting pomp, at a fashionable church and were largely attended. Amongst the uninvited spectators Leonard caught a glimpse of the bride's mother, who wept effusively; but everybody else appeared to be quite happy and cheerful. After the subsequent reception in Grosvenor Place and the departure of the young couple, Mrs. Morant turned to her host.

"It has all gone off as well as possible," she remarked, with a satisfied sigh; "all I regret is your loneliness and bereavement. Because this must, say what you will, be a bereavement to you."

"We will call it by that name, if you think we ought," Leonard replied, smiling gravely. "I may, at any rate, accept with a clear conscience your sympathy with me in my loneliness; for indeed, I suppose, there can hardly be a more lonely man in the world than I."

Mrs. Morant refrained from observing that he could become less so just as soon as he should choose. He would find that out for himself in due time, she thought,

and the advent of a grandson would set everything right. If, in the sequel, Archie should come into a substantial legacy, so much the better; but the laws of nature dictated, and would doubtless bring to pass, Harry's heritage of acres which ought surely to belong to his descendants.

Leonard himself was not of that opinion, although his eyes also were open to probable future events, and although he was perfectly conscious of how perverse he must appear to those who would gladly have done what in them lay to cheer his solitude. But to tell the honest truth (and it was always his endeavour to do and think that), he did not want their companionship. What he did, after a listless, undecided fashion, want was to get away to sea; but November yachting is a scarcely possible pastime in these latitudes, and it seemed hardly worth while to fit out for a Mediterranean cruise. Moreover, he was anxious to obtain the latest intelligence from the seat of war, which might at any moment become of more than public and patriotic interest to him. Chiefly on that account, therefore, he remained in London, where the news of Lord Methuen's first engagement with the enemy brought to him, as to thousands of others, mingled relief and apprehension. A success, it seemed, had been achieved; but a very slight and dearly bought one, while it was evident that another battle, perhaps several other battles, must be fought before the siege of Kimberley could be raised. The present writer chanced upon Lord Leonard in Pall Mall one afternoon at this time, and was struck by his haggard, harassed aspect. A word or two passed with reference to the literary matters which had brought about an intimacy between him and the present writer; but these he soon waved aside, with an impatient gesture.

"I can think about nothing but this ghastly war," he said; "I think about it until my nerves go all to pieces. God knows whether we aren't upon the brink of a great disaster; personally, I almost fear that we are. Doesn't it make you feel like a miserable coward to be here, doing nothing at all, while our poor fellows are being shot

down from behind rocks? No; not you; you're a family man; you are bound to stay at home and—and write reassuring articles for the papers, I suppose. But why, in Heaven's name, am I not upon the spot? I shouldn't be of much use if I were, you say? Well, I shouldn't be of much use; but I believe I shall have to go, all the same. Think of all those young men and boys in the thick of it! And they're killing them, you know—they're killing them!"

He spoke with an agitation and a suppressed anguish in his voice and eyes curiously unlike him; for he was, as a general rule, the quietest and most outwardly impassive of men. Obviously he had, as he confessed, lost control over his nerves, and he paid little heed to soothing predictions which have since been proved to be fairly accurate.

It must have been on the following day that he reached his club just after the telegram announcing the victory of Graspan had been affixed to the board in the hall round which a crowd of members had gathered. He hastily read, as they did, how the heights which the Boers had occupied had been gallantly stormed and the day won by the Naval Brigade; after which he looked down, with a throbbing heart, at the names of the officers who had fallen. The last of these was "Midshipman A. Morant." He stared for a moment at the words, which stared pitilessly, inexorably back at him; then he turned and walked silently out of the club.

Why do such things happen? Why do such cruel, stupid, purposeless things happen? There is no answer—though many are essayed by the well-meaning—there never will be any answer; and such things happen daily, and suns rise and set, and generations pass away, with their tears and their laughter, to be succeeded by other generations as light-hearted and as afflicted. But if the world does not come to an end, if sorrow and suffering do not come to an end, we at least do. Only some of us have to wait rather a long time for our release.

"It is as if I had known all along that this was coming," Leonard writes—and his handwriting, for once, is

barely legible—under date of the same evening. “Before I saw my boy’s name I knew that I was going to see it. His last letter is in front of me as I sit here alone; it is full of life and jollity. He has made some mistakes in spelling, for which I remember that I scolded him when I answered. He will write me no more letters, I shall never see his face, never hear his voice again. He was all I had. *Deus, Deus, meus, quare me dereliquisti!*”

CHAPTER XXX

Release

MRS. Morant's grief at the death of her boy was pitiable to witness and impossible to assuage. She had loved him—or, at any rate, now that she had lost him, she thought she had—more than the other children who strove in vain to comfort her, and what added sharpness to a sorrow already well-nigh unbearable was the remorseful thought that she might, had it so pleased her, have kept him alive.

"Ah, why didn't I let you have your way!" she cried, wringing her hands to Leonard, the only person, with the exception of her daughters, whom she would consent to receive. "Heaven gave me that chance of saving him, and I blindly threw it away! I shall never forgive myself to the day of my own death!"

Leonard answered, as he had answered once before, "You would have regretted letting me have my way. So would he, I think. The thing was to be; but even if it could have been averted you would not have known that you had averted it and you would have reproached yourself for a longer time—perhaps with better reason too—than you are doing now. We cannot control our own destinies, much less those of others. What is to be will be."

He was himself curiously quiet and composed; thereby surprising and disappointing Mrs. Morant, who thought that he might have shown a little more feeling, but who found, nevertheless, a good deal of solace in his company. He sat frequently with her during those miserable days; he was very kind and patient with her; if

he did not say much, he managed to convey to her the consoling impression that she could say as much as she liked and weep to her heart's content. To be allowed to do so was the best thing for her, he told her daughters, and his sole wish seemed to be that the best that could be done for her should be done. She must have hurt him with her heartbroken ejaculations and her reminiscences of Archie's childhood; the spectacle of a distress at once so violent and so visibly ephemeral cannot but have embittered his own, which was of a very different order; but the fact probably was that neither she nor anybody else had power to hurt him greatly. Prometheus, chained to his rock, with the eagle tearing at his vitals, would scarcely have felt or noticed casual stabs.

Muriel, who, with her husband, hastened home from the shores of the Mediterranean on hearing the sad news, was so sorry for him that she threw pride to the winds and told him, in simple, direct language, how very sorry she was. He looked at her when she said that, saw that she was speaking the truth, and was infinitely touched.

"Ah, you understand," said he.

"Oh, but of course I do!" she exclaimed, with tears in her eyes; "of course I understand that he was a son to you, and that nobody can ever take his place or attempt to take his place. But won't you let me make what reparation I can for all the years in which I have misunderstood—perhaps rather wilfully misunderstood—you?"

"My dear," he answered, patting her on the shoulder, "you owe me no reparation; if there has been wilfulness, it has been on my side, I am afraid, not on yours, and now it is too late for fresh starts. But there is a species of reparation which may be your due and which circumstances, anyhow, leave me no choice but to make. I have just executed a new will, under which Harry will succeed to the whole of my landed property when I die. He is, so to speak, Archie's heir, as well as mine, you see."

"And he is my husband," Muriel remarked, after a pause.

"Yes; that will of course be the ostensible explanation. 'It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.'"

His words were singularly ungracious; but his face and voice contradicted them. If he would not acknowledge that Muriel was his daughter, he could and did admit that her behaviour was that of a daughter, and he became—so he says in his diary—not only grateful to her, but fond of her. She, for her part, had always been fond of him, had always looked upon him as her father, though she had, not unnaturally, resented his coldness. That she and the few others who were in his secret should soon have persuaded themselves that he was really what he passed for being, and should have learned to regard the attitude which he took up with reference to that question as the result of an invincible hallucination, was scarcely surprising. It was never again alluded to between them during an intercourse which remained friendly and affectionate up to the last.

"I hope," he resumed, "that you and Harry will consent to come and live with me at Leonard's End. If I were to follow my inclination, I would abdicate in your favour to-morrow; but I have a feeling that no man has any business to abdicate. I don't think, however, that you will find me much in your way."

He had a plan for getting, at least temporarily, out of their way and out of everybody's way which many men of his class and position were adopting at that time. Holding, as he did, a commission in the Yeomanry of his country, his application for employment in South Africa was not likely to be refused, nor was it refused. But here, as always, his bad luck intervened, and the doctors would not pass him. Symptoms which had hitherto been pronounced unimportant were now said to indicate an organic affection of the heart; he was absolutely forbidden to proceed on active service, and was even warned that his life was a very precarious one.

"I suppose," he writes, "those worthy practitioners who wagged their heads over me so gravely and sympathisingly did not suspect that they were offering me a consolation for a disappointment. The worst of it is that

I have difficulty in believing them; for I do not feel ill. No human being, it is said, ever really wishes for death; but either that must be a false statement or else all the people who commit suicide every year must be out of their minds. I am certainly not mad; yet I would put an end to myself here and now, were it not that I feel bound to endure whatever ordeal may be imposed upon me. It is curious that, although I have no desire for immortality, nor any fear of hell, nor any longing, save for rest and oblivion, it should be a thing quite impossible for me to take my own life."

One is half inclined to wonder, after perusing that long script of his—a confession written almost uninterruptedly in a minor key from start to finish—why he should have hesitated. But it has to be remembered that he was a brave man, and it would appear that he was also, in his way, a religious one. "The methods which the Creator uses with us, to whom He has granted this spell of conscious existence, are past finding out," he remarks somewhere; "all we know is that we must needs bow our heads and take what comes. It is childish to fly into a passion and contemptible to sit down and cry. Let us at least preserve our self-respect, happen what may."

Early in the spring he went off, all by himself, for a prolonged yachting cruise and was absent from England for many months.

In compliance with his repeatedly expressed wish, and perhaps a little against their own, Harry and Muriel established themselves at Leonard's End, which became and has remained, their home. The arrangement had its obvious drawbacks; but, since he desired it so strongly, they yielded, as a matter of duty, and were rewarded in the sequel by practically undisturbed possession of the place. For very soon after he returned in the autumn he grew aware of a well-nigh intolerable distaste for his old home. There were certain duties connected with his position which he had to discharge, and he discharged them; but the majority, he found, could be delegated, without injuring anybody, to his daughter or his son-in-

law; so he pleaded other business and betook himself to London, where he spent the beginning of the winter. His diary records the relief that he experienced on quitting scenes associated with the many sorrows and few joys of his life; he adds a confident hope that he will never be compelled to revisit them. His health was by this time in a condition which the doctors plainly called alarming, but which caused him no alarm, nor apparently aroused any amongst his belongings, from whom he concealed the fact that he had had two sharp attacks of angina pectoris. To the present writer, with whom he was just then brought into frequent relations, he spoke abruptly and quite frankly upon the subject one day.

"I am going to die before long," he said, "and I want you, after I am gone, to go carefully through my manuscripts, published and unpublished. Some of them, I think, may be found worthy of outlasting me, eh?"

This was said with a glance of appeal so humble and wistful that no ordinarily humane person could have refused him the reply for which he asked. It is, moreover, true that many of his essays and a few of his verses deserve to live. Whether they will do so or not is, of course, another question. The conventional, obligatory expression of a hope that he was not really as ill as he looked drew from him one of those quiet laughs which are sadder than tears.

"My dear fellow," said he, "when you have read the autobiography which I mean you to read as soon as the breath is out of my body, you will understand that the one stroke of luck I have had since I first began to breathe has been a diseased heart. There will be other things which I daresay you won't understand, and which cannot be explained, unless perchance they explain themselves to some readers; but what will be patent to you and everybody else will be that it was high time for me to cease breathing."

The birth of a son to Muriel and an heir to his estates did not attract him down to Leonard's End, and he was content to receive assurances that all was going well with mother and child from Mrs. Morant, who had been sum-

moned thither for the event. Verbal assurances to the same effect reached him later from the same source; for Mrs. Morant had decided to take up her abode in London, where she had many friends and where, despite her deep mourning, she was beginning to see a good deal of them in a quiet way. Shortly after Christmas she was persuaded to sing at a great concert organised by charitable ladies in aid of one of the numerous war-funds, and a pathetic interest attached to her appearance on the occasion by reason of the known circumstance that she had lost a son in the earlier stages of the conflict. Moreover, she sang extremely well; so that the ovation which she received before retiring from the platform was perhaps as much a tribute to her gifts as an evidence of public sympathy. Leonard, who was amongst the audience, watched her, with his chin in his hand and an unfathomable expression in his dark eyes. Possibly he was wondering how she could do it; but more probably he was only envying her, as he had often envied her before. Hers was the right sort of temperament for commerce with the world and his was the wrong one; he had long ago perceived that and had admired in her a certain vitality and courageous acceptance of fate which were beyond his attainment.

Nevertheless, she thought him rather harsh and unkind when, on the way out, the surging crowd brought them into abrupt proximity. She was a little excited and elated at the moment, a Royal personage having just summoned her and having said a few amiable, appropriate words; her colour was slightly heightened, her eyes were sparkling, she looked very handsome and almost young; she was laughing and talking with some of her acquaintances, whose duty and pleasure it was to congratulate her. Then on a sudden she caught sight of Leonard's sallow, mournful countenance, which seemed to embody a mute reproach.

"I couldn't help it," she whispered, half-apologetically, half-impatiently, in his ear; "they insisted upon my singing for them; it would have been churlish and selfish to

refuse, considering that the object was what it is. But you must not think that I ever forget."

"I think you sometimes forget," he answered curtly, "and I think that that is the very best thing you can do. What is the use of always remembering? *Die Klage, sie wecket die Todten nicht auf.* The main thing, I suppose, is to do one's duty by the living, and if one can manage to enjoy doing it, so much the better."

"That is not really your opinion," she returned resentfully; "your real opinion is that resignation is a contemptible sort of virtue, if indeed it be a virtue at all. I don't myself see how one is to do one's duty by the living without at least appearing to enjoy doing it; but you, I know, hold different views, and I hardly venture to hope that you will ever so much as simulate an interest in the unoffending child who is your grandson, as well as mine. So much the worse for you, I can't help thinking."

She was afterwards sorry that she had betrayed a not unnatural irritation; for she never saw Lord Leonard again. His servant found him, the next morning, lying on his face beside his writing-table, and the hastily-summoned doctor pronounced that life had been extinct for many hours. It was stated at the subsequent inquest that the complaint from which he had suffered terminated in most cases like that, and it was added, for the comfort and consolation of the relatives, that he must, had he lived longer, have been called upon to endure attacks of violent pain. The last words of his diary, which were written on the last night of his life, may be given here without alteration or excision.

"It is more than a year since my dear boy was killed out there in South Africa, and a year is a long time. I have just returned from hearing his mother sing at the Albert Hall before I know not how many hundreds or thousands of people; she had a well-deserved triumph. After the thing was over I met her on the stairs, and because, as usual, I did not contrive to express myself properly, she thought I was angry with her for being in good spirits. I was not in the least angry; I don't wish her, or anybody else, to feel as I do; I quite recognise that

those who have still a part to play in the world cannot, and ought not to, feel as I do. But I thank God that my part in this world is near an end. Not that I am conscious of being worse than usual to-night. There is perhaps a slightly increased difficulty in respiration, which compels me to sit here by the open window, instead of going to bed, though the night is cold and frosty; but that is all.

"I had a kindly little scribble in pencil this morning from Muriel—the first that she has been allowed to attempt, she says. She seems to be very happy. Juliet reproached me just now for taking no interest in the baby, whom of course she calls my grandson. Alas! it is too true that I take but a faint interest in him, and I am glad that there is so little probability of my having, as she phrases it, to 'simulate' one. I have always been such a poor hand at simulation.

"The photograph of Archie in cricketing flannels, which stands before me on my writing-table, has a little the air of beckoning to me. He seems to say, 'Come along out of this, old man; they don't want us here. Let's be off and have a ripping time together, as we used.'

"Ah, no! we have done with 'ripping times,' he and I; we have 'finished joy and moan'; for us there will be no more cricket, no more rides, no more shooting; we shall meet no more and part no more. And yet—is it credible that all these millions of human beings around me were created for a little merriment, a good deal of sorrow, and then final extinction? As I sit here, all alone, staring up at the eternal stars which twinkle faintly through a veil of mist and smoke, I can't but think that somehow, some time, in some unimaginable way, all will yet be well with us.

" 'My breath to Heaven like vapour goes,
May my soul follow soon! ' "

THE END.

